A Critical Evaluation of John Gower's 'Confessio Amantis'.

Donald Gustave Schueler

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

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A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF JOHN GOWER'S
CONFESSIO AMANTIS

A Dissertation

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in

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by

Donald Gustave Schueler
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ABSTRACT

Only a very limited amount of literary criticism has had John Gower's Confessio Amantis as its subject in the more than half century since George C. Macaulay produced the definitive edition of this and the poet's other works. Of the few studies that have been written, most have been concerned with particular, isolated aspects of Gower's many-sided English poem. In the opinion of some critics this general neglect has been deserved. The present writer feels otherwise, but in order to prove his point it has been necessary for him to begin with an important reservation: the Confessio Amantis is admittedly an anachronism; for the most part it lacks those universal and timeless elements that make Chaucer's work still seem fresh and vital. Yet it is in this direction that much of the value of the Confessio Amantis lies. When we read Chaucer it is only as an afterthought that we remember that he was "medieval." When we read Gower, it is the central thing. His work is, in other words, an introduction to those elements which gave the age in which he lived its unique character. As such as introduction, the Confessio Amantis has no peer in Middle English literature. It is a veritable compendium
of the ideas and ideals that set medieval England apart from that
Renaissance which Chaucer in many ways anticipated.

The author of the present study has attempted to prove that,
within the framework of its own age, the Confessio Amantis is quite
as excellent a work as Gower's contemporaries believed it to be.
Its controlling purpose, which is to combine entertainment and lore;
its structure, which is complex and sometimes bewildering; its
subject matter, which is prodigiously diverse and often dated—all
these dements contrive to make the poem alien to the modern temper-
ment. Yet to understand it and appreciate it is to understand and
appreciate the world in which Gower--and Chaucer--lived.

In the present study, various aspects of the Confessio Amantis
are dealt with in separate chapters; its ethical content, its didactic
purpose, its structure, its representation of romantic love, and
its narrative and poetic techniques. However, none of these sub-
jects is considered in isolation. The present writer has been con-
cerned to explain the manner in which the varied elements in the
poem are related to each other and to Gower's age, and to argue that,
contrary to the usual critical opinion, they form a masterful and im-
posing design. The Confessio Amantis is in fact a truly monumental
work, partly because of its considerable poetic qualities, and partly
because, as a monument, it commemorates a veritable host of ideas
and ideals, some of them beautiful and profound, which have vanished
from our world.
INTRODUCTION

John Gower has been so overshadowed by the reputation of his great contemporary, Chaucer, that even his name, outside the circle of a specialized group, has been virtually unknown until quite recently. This was not always the case. In his own time, and during the two centuries that followed, he was often paired with Chaucer and mentioned with an equal reverence—a fact which will be considered in detail a little later on. Time, of course, is the final arbiter in these matters; it brooks no argument except from still more time. However, in that connection it is worth noting that Gower's star, eclipsed for centuries, has acquired a modest shine of late. The intelligent but almost incidental praise that Macaulay gave the poet more than a half century ago has, in the last decade, had its careful echoes; I have no greater ambition as far as these pages are concerned than to add a little depth to them.

The Confessio Amantis, Gower's one important English work, will be the center of this study. The reader will do well to know beforehand the particular point of view from which the poem will be dealt with. The argument here is that Gower ranks as a major poet in
the history of English literature, a fact which the modern reader may find less than obvious, and, furthermore, that he is an exclusively medieval poet, a fact which the reader will readily concede. The point to be made is that Gower cannot be read and understood unless these statements are taken in conjunction. His work cannot be extricated, as Chaucer's can, from the world in which it was created. Chaucer was infinitely the more universal of the two poets. In his ability to use much that is enduring in human experience as his subject matter he shares with Shakespeare and one or two others the highest eminence of English poetry. But granting Gower's position in the second range, the present study will nevertheless urge that the long neglect of him has been due to the effect of time more than to his own poetic limitations. The one factor does not necessarily dovetail with the other. Contrary to the popular platitude, we are not the products of all that has gone before. We lose much along the way. And among the things that are lost are many of the very qualities that seemed—that were—most representative, most distinctive, most beautiful, to the particular cultures that produced them. Gower's art has been among the casualties; there have been others—Spenser's, Pope's, even Wordsworth's—not so forgotten as Gower's chiefly because they are a little closer to us in time.
It will never be possible for the *Confessio Amantis* to be read, as *Hamlet* or the *Canterbury Tales* can be, by a sophomore. But for those who are attracted to the Middle Ages, not because of the seemingly unchanging human element that is common to all times and places, but because of what was special and unique about that bygone time—for those, Gower is the man. When we read Chaucer it is only as an after-thought that we remind ourselves that he was "medieval." When we read Gower, it is the central thing. The world of the *Confessio Amantis* is as removed from our everyday experience as the lost Atlantis; the ideas that Gower dealt with, the structure that he chose for his poem, the very music of his lines, seem respectively quaint, unwieldy, and naive to us.

As a matter of fact they are none of these things. They are simply different because they no longer exist in our own time, and only by a conscious effort on our part can they be resurrected.

My purpose, then, is to make this "conscious effort," and, in the process, to perhaps persuade the student of the Middle Ages that the *Confessio Amantis* is worthy of his attention. Anyone who would understand the medieval world, and particularly the world of England in the fourteenth century, that is, its special genius, might do well to reconsider the ideas, the architectonic daring, the poetic grace and ease with which
Gower once challenged and delighted the most perceptive and intelligent people of that long ago time.
FOOTNOTES

I

GOWER: HIS LIFE

John Gower's character will never emerge to any meaningful extent from the documents that are now available or from any that are likely to be discovered in the future. Even the cold facts concerning his life are few; they leave us with little insight into the life of the man and virtually none at all into the life of the poet. But, in spite of these reservations, the bare and unfinished outline which the legal records provide, colored, as it were, by the character of Gower's literary output, does suggest a more complete sketch than would at first seem possible. The current research of Professor John Fisher has thrown the only important new light on this subject since Macaulay treated it more than sixty years ago.¹

Of Gower's exact birthplace or parentage nothing whatever is known. From internal evidence--primarily the fact that the poet considered himself an old man in 1390, when he was writing the Confessio Amantis--Macaulay inferred that "he was born about the year 1330, or possibly somewhat later."² But one could project his birth year up to 1340 without violating the
medieval idea of the word "old." As for his origins, John Leland, in his sixteenth century Commentarii had said that Gower came from Stitenhan in Yorkshire, from which a present-day noble family of Gowers derives. Macaulay, in his wish to confirm that the poet came from Kent, has perhaps dismissed Leland's assertion too completely, as we shall see in a moment, but at any rate the Kentish connection, if not exclusive of any other, is itself beyond reasonable doubt. In 1349, one Sir Robert Gower of Kent, owner-by-grant of the manor of Kentwell, Suffolk, died and left this property and others to his two daughters, Katherine and Joanna. John Gower's exact kinship to this family is not known, but a connection unquestionably existed. For one thing, the coat of arms on Sir Robert's tomb in Brabourne Church, Kent, approximates that of the poet's. Also, the manor of Kentwell was eventually to come into Gower's possession through a business transaction involving the Joanna mentioned above. Corroborating these facts, Weever, in his seventeenth century Ancient Funeral Monuments (p. 270), says in a reference to Sir Robert that it was "from this family John Gower the poet was descended." In a more general way, evidence of Gower's Kentish origins is to be found in the dialect traces in the Confessio Amantis and in the fact that the executors of his will are members of Kentish families.
The fact that Gower's genealogical tree almost certainly had its roots in Yorkshire as well as in Kent is a discovery that has only recently come about, thanks to the research of Professor Fisher. As noted, Macaulay, and before him, Thynne, and then Sir Harris Nicolas denied Leland's assertion of the Yorkshire connection on the basis that Gower's arms, and Sir Robert's, as represented on their tombs, differed altogether from the arms of the Stitenham Gowers of Yorkshire, the family with which Leland had tentatively identified the poet. Professor Fisher, however, has noted the existence of another family of Gowers in Yorkshire, "more prominent in the fourteenth century than the Gowers of Stitenham, whose arms bear a much closer resemblance than those of the Stitenham Gowers to the arms of the Kentish Gowers." The connection between the poet and this family, the Langbargh Gowers, is upheld by further evidence, particularly the connection between Sir Robert Gower of Kent and the Langbargh Gowers through their mutual association with other families. It would also seem that the Yorkshire family was the older branch of the clan, dating back to at least 1170, and that the Gowers were established in Kent only in 1337 when Sir Robert came there in the service of the Earl of Athol and his wife. If and when further research discloses the exact relationship of Sir Robert Gower to
the poet, much further light may be cast on the latter's background, and at least something of his early milieu may be surmised. In the meantime, the poet's youth is a blank page. That he acquired a broad and fairly thorough education is apparent from his work, but no single document has been found to tell us of his early years. We know that in January 1398, in his old age, he married one Agnes Groundolf of Southwark, but it is doubtful that this was his first matrimonial venture. In the Mirour de l'Ommé, while he is rebuking those who tell a husband of his wife's misdeeds, he makes this aside:

Je di pur moy, ly quel q'il soit,
Qui de ma femme mal enseigne
Me dist, quant je la tiens ceinteine.

(Mir. 8794-8796)

And later on, in discussing those wives who dislike people because their husbands are fond of them, he throws in a cautious afterthought:

Ne di pas q'ensi fait la moie

(Mir. 17649)

From internal evidence Macaulay proposed the years 1376-1379 for the composition of the work, and since there is no reason to doubt the subjective note in the lines already quoted, we may assume that he was married at that time. However, if any children came from this or any other marriage he contracted,
they apparently did not survive him, since there is no mention of them in his will. 11

Several likenesses of Gower exist. One is the effigy on his tomb in St. Saviour's Church, now called Southwark Cathedral, which was originally part of the Priory of St. Mary Overy. At present, the poet's head "rests on a pile of three folio volumes marked with the names of his three principal works, Vox Clamantis, Speculum Meditantis, Confessio Amantis. He has a rather round face with high cheek bones, a moustache and a slightly forked beard, hair long and curling upwards, and round his head a chaplet of four red roses at intervals upon a band. "12

In the Bodley 902 MS. of the Confessio Amantis there is a miniature representing the Lover receiving absolution from the Priest, and the face of the Lover is presumably a representation of the poet. According to Macaulay it does, in fact, resemble to some extent the figure on the tomb, although the latter represents a man in "the flower of life," whereas the miniature represents an old man. 13 In any case, the effigy can hardly count as a portrait.

According to Stow's account in the Annals of England, the tomb, along with much other Church property, had been defaced by 1600, and the image was mutilated "by cutting off the nose and striking off the hands. "14 In the centuries to follow, the tomb and the
effigy were to undergo various restorations and repainting during which even the colors of the robes were altogether changed. Among other likenesses are miniatures in the Cotton and Glasgow MSS. of the Vox Clamantis, in both of which the poet is represented, appropriately enough, as an archer drawing a bow at the world. Macaulay feels that these representations give us a more correct contemporary portrait than the others, but both are rendered with such naïveté, even when compared with a miniature like the Chaucer portrait in Hoccleve's Regement of Princes, that it would be futile to conclude from them anything more than that Gower did boast a moustache and a forked beard.

So much—not much indeed—for the poet's physical appearance. By 1390, when he was writing the Confessio Amantis, he was in poor health and had been for a long time. And in the last years of his life he was blind.

Despite the limited information at hand, there can be no doubt about Gower's status as a prosperous and respected citizen of the London of his time. If he could not boast as close a connection with the royal household as could Chaucer, he was, at any rate, no stranger to it. It was at Richard's own bidding that he undertook the writing of the Confessio Amantis, as he tells us in the Prologue:
In Temse when it was flowende
As I be bote com rowende,
So as fortune hir tyme sette,
My liege lord par chaunce I mette;
And so befel, as I cam nyh,
Out of my bot, whan he me syh,
He bad me come in to his barge.
And whan I was with him at large,
Amonges othre thinges seid
He hath this charge upon me leid,
And bad me doo my besynesse
That to his hihe worthinesse
Some newe thing I scholde boke,
That he himself it mihte loke
After the forme of my writynge.
And thus upon his commandynge
Myn herte is wel the more glad
To write so as he me bad.

(CA, Prol., 39-56.)

In 1393, Henry of Lancaster, whom Gower had admired long be-
fore he became England's king, presented the poet with a collar,
or at any rate he paid one Richard Dancaster 26s. 8d. "on
account of another collar given by the earl of Derby to 'an Esquire
John Gower." (Macaulay notes that this particular collar was
"a comparatively cheap one.") The effigy on the tomb is re-
presented with a gilded collar of SS, displaying the swan that
Henry adopted as his emblem only after he became king. Despite
the alterations of the tomb already referred to, it is probable that
at the time of his death Gower was the owner of a more elaborate
collar than the one noted in the record above. There are further
evidences of royal favor, notably the fact that on November 21,
1399, and again in April, 1400, the newly crowned King Henry
granted to the "king's esquire John Gower" two pipes of "wine of Gascony," perhaps in payment for the poet's support in the Cronica Tripertita and other Latin poems. Aside from such evidence of his familiarity with royal personages, the knowledgeable and sometimes very bold references in his works to all three of the sovereigns under whom he lived indicate a fairly close proximity to the court. This connection need not be overemphasized, however, merely to prove Gower's relative prominence in the London of his day. His impressive funeral monument, his real-estate transactions, his estate as represented in his will, his acquaintance with distinguished citizens, and like evidence, all corroborate the impression that one has from his works, an impression of authoritativeness reinforced by material wealth and powerful connections. But unfortunately none of this evidence gives us any certain proof of what Gower did by way of profession. The Confessio Amantis or the Cronica Tripertita might earn Gower a collar or a few pipes of wine as well as the prestige that went with them, but they did not provide the money for the manors of Feltwell and Moulton or for the dignified tomb in St. Mary Overy. It seems remarkable, in fact, that, even granting the characteristic obscurity of medieval records, not one of the eighty-odd documents that might conceivably refer to the poet describes him in terms of his profession, despite the common practice of legally identifying men by that means.
few records append the title "Esquire" or the place name, Kent, but even these are the exception. Leland, without citing the source of his information, stated that he practised as a lawyer. Macaulay discounts the possibility on the basis of Gower's fierce condemnation of that calling. The poet considers the law the worst of all secular estates and condemns its practitioners "par covoitise ou par haltesce" (Mir. 24089). But in another section of the Mirour (21774) the author, in anticipating the critics who may blame him for handling sacred subjects when he himself is not a clerk, says "Ainz ai vestu la raye manche" (Mir. 21774). This may well be a reference to the stripes which some lawyers were known to wear as a badge upon their sleeves. It is worth remarking that Gower's condemnation of the law, and his previous reference to "la raye" are not as contradictory as they might seem, at least not when one keeps in mind the habitually moral and critical tone which the author adopts in the Mirour as elsewhere. Familiarity breeds contempt, as the saying goes, and contempt is a faculty strong in Gower. He is never slow to criticize any estate, even when it has his allegiance. Consider, for example, his attitude toward the Church. He was an intensely religious man, and a champion of the clergy against the secular incursions of king and parliament. But his partisanship did not prevent him from describing the members of the religious orders
in the most scathing terms. The fact is that he bitingly criticizes all the estates of man with an energetic catholicity worthy of Langland. It leaves us little to choose from, if we try to determine his partiality according to the degree of blame he puts on one profession as compared to another. By that measure we would end by concluding that he belonged to no profession at all. (Macaulay did, however, feel that he was most gentle in his criticism of the merchant class.)\(^{24}\) In short, the possibility that Gower was a lawyer cannot be discounted, despite the fact that it hinges on Leland's questionable assertion and on Gower's one hint.\(^ {25}\)

Henry Morley, in his *English Writers*, came up with the rather ingenious theory that Gower was in holy orders, though not a priest.\(^ {26}\) He based this idea on the discovery that one John Gower, clerk, had been given a royal grant to the living of Great Braxted in Essex for the years 1393-1397. The fact that 1397 was the year of Gower's marriage to Agnes Groundolf leads Professor Morley to conclude that the poet resigned the rectory on his marriage. He finds further confirmation for his theory in the fact that Great Braxted is very near Wigborough (Wygebergh), a manor belonging to one William Septvanuns, to which a man named John Gower had claim of a yearly rent of \'10, according to the *Close Rolls*, 1365.\(^ {27}\)
Macaulay dismissed Morley's theory for several reasons: he did not think it likely "that a clergyman who had held an important rectory for six or seven years should not only have been permitted to marry, but should have had his marriage celebrated in the Priory of St. Mary Overy and with the particular sanction of the bishop of Winchester." He also points out that Gower was an 'Esquire,' since he is so called in the inscription on his tomb and in certain documents, one of them dated during the period when he was supposed to be a clerk. And in the Mirour de l'Omme the poet calls himself a layman. Furthermore, the "language which he [Gower] uses about rectors who fail to perform the duties of their offices makes it almost inconceivable that he should himself have held a rectory without qualifying himself for the performance of the service of the Church even by taking priest's orders." The last is a moot point which need not be taken as strongly as Macaulay puts it, but his general argument does cancel out Morley's theory quite effectively—so effectively, in fact, that I would not have introduced it into this general summary but for a hitherto unnoticed sidelight that it throws on the problem of identifying Gower the poet among a considerable number of John Gowers mentioned in fourteenth century records. As part of his argument in dismissing Morley's case,
Macaulay expressed grave doubt that the Gower who received rent from the Wigborough estate near Great Braxted was the poet. The interval of time involved between the receipt of rents (1365) and the granting of the living at the rectory (1393), the frequency of the name in the records, and, perhaps most of all, an unwillingness on Macaulay's part to believe that the collector-of-rents, whom he assumed to be a villain on the basis of related documents, all these considerations led the scholar to discount the connection between Wigborough and Great Braxted, and between either one and the poet. As it happens, however, Professor Fisher has gone to considerable pains to prove (a) that there was an intricate series of real-estate transactions that connected "our" Gower and John Septvauns, the owner of Wigborough manor, and (b) that Wigborough was involved in those transactions. If Fisher is to be believed— and his argument is convincing— then we are faced with the fact that the poet, in 1365, was drawing rent from an estate which was little more than a mile away from Great Braxted, where from 1393 to 1397 another John Gower was rector. A coincidence, perhaps; but it does seem more likely that some fairly close family connection is involved. If that is the case, it means that during the later years of the fourteenth century there were, among the several John Gowers alive at the time, two who were of the same family, both dwelling in the
environ s of London. This fact would seem to be a considerable
complication, since it would imply that the poet could not be
identified merely in terms of family, or of Kent, or even in terms
of the associates with which his name is linked in various trans-
actions, since those associates might have been acquainted with
both John Gowers. But this theoretical complication is also a
theoretical clue. Until now, almost all investigation of Gower's
family relationships has centered upon the figures of Sir Robert
Gower and his daughter, Joanna. It does seem possible, however,
that a study of records relating to John Gower, clerk and rector
of Great Braxted, and a person of some importance, might turn
up new information about the poet and his family.

Of the various records that are concerned with real-estate
transactions in which Gower had, or may have had, a part, those
dealing with the acquisition and later disposal of the manors of
Kentwell and Aldington are the most interesting. Kentwell, as
we have seen, was the Suffolk property left by Sir Robert to his
two daughters, Katherine and Joanna. Originally it had been
held by Sir Robert only for life as a grant of the Earl of Athol, in
whose service he had been. However, in 1339, the royal confirma-
tion of a quitclaim by the late earl "to Robert Gower, knight, his
heirs and assigns,"[32] would seem to have guaranteed the land for
the knight's heirs. This was not to be the case. The widowed
countess, it is true, did honor the claim of the two daughters after Sir Robert's death, but evidently her son, the new earl, was not similarly disposed. When the older daughter, Katherine, died in 1358, he took over the manor without having any title to it. There was "little a 16-year old girl could do to stop him," as Professor Fisher says of Sir Robert's younger daughter, Joanna. However, at the instigation of her first husband, whom she married some time between 1358 and 1364, or possibly at the prompting of her relative, John Gower, she brought suit for the property in 1364. There followed a long and involved series of litigations by means of which Joanna, the wife of three husbands in swift succession, sought to clear the title of Kentwell. In June, 1368, she and her third spouse, John Spenythorn, granted Kentwell to John Gower, and he became the chief litigant in the unending process by means of which the Gowers sought to make good their claim to the manor. The matter was finally settled in John Gower's favor, and in September, 1373, he disposed of the Kentwell property to a Sir John Cobham and others.

Sir John Cobham also figures importantly in Gower's complicated acquisition and later disposal of the manor of Aldington. This transaction, or rather series of transactions, is one which even Fisher, who seems on familiar ground with the Patent Rolls,
the Inquisitions, the Close Rolls, and the secrets they contain, calls "something of a mess." William Septvauns, an orphaned youth who had apparently not yet reached his twentieth year in 1365, had nevertheless managed to get himself into debt to the amount of £1,060 in fourteenth century currency—a tremendous sum—which seems to have necessitated the selling-off of many, if not all, of his estates. John Gower purchased the manor of Aldington from him in February, 1365. \(^{37}\) (Note that this was during the period when Joanna Neve, nee Gower, was trying to clear the title to Kentwell, which she was shortly to grant to the poet.) The matter did not end with the sale, however. In April, 1366, a commission was issued to Sir John Cobham of Kent, and others, \(^{38}\) "to inquire as to the age of William, son and heir of William de Septvauns, Knight, and, if it be found that he is still a minor, to ascertain by whom the previous proof of age was made, what waste has been done the lands, and what profit the king has lost by reason of the incorrect proof of age."\(^{39}\) The commission did, in fact, come to the conclusion that William was underage. \(^{40}\) Macaulay, as we have seen, found it "impossible without further proof to assume that the villainous misleader of youth who is described to us in the report of the commission, as encouraging a young man to defraud the crown
by means of perjury, in order that he may purchase his lands from him at a nominal price, can be identical with the grave moralist of the Speculum Hominis and the Vox Clamantis. He contented himself with the supposition that the John Gower involved was a relative of the poet. In any case, Macaulay's concern was overstated. The commission came to the conclusion that the crown had not been defrauded—at least no harm had been done to the lands. Nor had the price been "nominal," as Macaulay stated. It was decided, however, that the property be taken back into the king's hands until young Septvauns should come of age.

If Macaulay overstates the probable guilt of the John Gower involved, it is also possible that Professor Fisher understates his subject's complicity in his desire to identify the real-estate operator with the poet. "Without more evidence," he says, "it is idle to speculate on the legal and moral issues involved." In the same paragraph he points out that "there is nothing in the record of the first proof of age . . . to suggest that it was in any way illegal, and it proves--with much more circumstantial evidence, actually, than is found in the later inquisition--that William son of William was born in 17 Edward III rather than in 20 Edward III." However, the very fact that the matter was sufficiently in doubt to prompt a royal inquisition, and that the
commission appointed named Gower, among others, as influencing the youth to alienate his lands, would suggest an interpretation not quite so favorable to the John Gower involved. At any rate, whether or not Gower's complicity involved any actual guilt, it did not prevent him from at last acquiring most of Aldington in February, 1368, when William Septvauns did legally come of age—this, notwithstanding the fact that the debt-ridden young man was "held to the king by a bond in £3000 not to alienate, remit, or quitclaim his inheritance to any person or persons in fee or for life." Interestingly enough, Gower disposed of this manor in 1374 to John Cobham, Thomas Brokhull (both of whom had been on the commission to determine William Septvauns' age), and two other men. And these four were the same men to whom he granted Kentwell in 1373.

There are records of other real-estate transactions involving a John Gower; but only two of them are sufficiently relevant to be mentioned. These involve the purchase of Feltwell and Moulton in 1382. In contrast to his practice in other cases, Gower held on to these two manors, and in his will bequeathed them to his wife.

The complexity of many of Gower's real-estate dealings, the fact that he evidently did not occupy the lands that he purchased
and, most of all, the recurrence of the same names in various sales, notably that of Cobham, have all led Professor Fisher to suggest that we "have to do not with any personal real estate transactions but with the acquisition and manipulation of wealth by some sort of syndicate." The deduction which he draws from this is that Gower, whatever else he was, was probably an "investor" or "entrepreneur" in real estate.

Lawyer, clerk, merchant, or real estate investor—all of these claims rest on fairly slim evidence. The case for the last is certainly the strongest. On the other hand, we can safely rule out the theory that Gower was in holy orders. As for Macaulay's idea that he might have been a merchant, it can not be contradicted for the same reason that it can not be proved: there is no real evidence either way. It is worth mentioning, perhaps, that the merchants of Gower's day were very fond of displaying the trademarks of their professions upon their tombs, particularly the wool merchants, who are often represented with a proud symbol, a woolpack or a sheep, at their feet. A lion rests at Gower's. As for the poet's high opinion of the wool-trade, which Macaulay points out, it should not be confused with praise of wool-merchants. Gower's paean to wool is decidedly a celebration of a national resource and must be understood as an aspect of his nationalism, not a tradesman's narrow pride.
The possibility that he was a lawyer, or at least trained in the law, deserves more serious consideration, as noted above (p.14). Certainly, some experience with the law, far from hindering, would have abetted his interest in real estate speculation. It might even explain why Chaucer, about to leave England in May, 1378, on one of his trips to the Continent, gave to Gower and a man named Richard Forester his power of attorney. Presumably Chaucer had more practical considerations in mind than friendship for Gower or admiration of his poetical abilities.

Along with so many other riddles that the documents relating to Gower present is one posed by the following excerpt from the Close Rolls:

11 Dec. 1397. Memorandum of a mainprise under pain of £40, made in chancery 6 December this year by John Frenche, Peter Blake, Thomas Gandre, all of London, and Robert Markle, serjeant at arms, for Thomas Caudre, canon in the priory of St. Mary Overy in Southwerke, that he shall do or procure no harm to John Gower.

The poet probably lived at St. Mary Overy's during the last years of his life; and in any case the church was to be his final resting place as well as a major beneficiary of his will. In other words, there can be little doubt that the John Gower mentioned in the Memorandum is the poet. The taint of violence, from which hardly any contemporary biography is free,
seems to have touched even this man whom one would have expected to be most immune to it. "Was Gower, now old and blind, having difficulty collecting his debts and rents? Or were his difficulties political?" The only answer is that there is no answer--yet.

However, neither threats of violence, the rise and fall of kings, ill health, nor speculations in real estate prevented the poet from turning out a prodigious amount of poetry, in French, Latin, and English, during the latter half of his life, the period with which most of the above records deal. Macaulay, on the basis of internal evidence, suggests that the Mirour de l'Ommme was probably written between 1376 and 1379, the Vox Clamantis in 1382, and the Confessio Amantis in 1390-91. Despite the detached and moralistic tone of so much of his work, he was probably no more an "ivory tower" sort of poet than was Chaucer.

The last document that we need consider in this general summary is the poet's will. It is dated August 15, 1408, and proved on October 24th of the same year, the month during which Gower presumably died. In it the testator "bequeathes his soul to the Creator, and his body to be buried in the church of the Canons of St. Mary Overes, in the place specially appointed for this purpose." Through gifts and alms, Gower made certain that his departed soul would be well attended by
the prayers of the living; and with a fine medieval feeling for the natural hierarchy of things, even prayers, he dispensed his gifts and alms according to rank. The prior of St. Mary Overy received 40s., the subprior 20s., each canon who was a priest 13s. 4d., and the other canons 6s. 8d., "that they may all severally pray for him the more devoutly at his funeral." The servants of the priory got 2s. or 1s. depending on their positions. The Church of St. Mary Magdalene and the four parish churches of Southwark received similar bequests. The poet was particularly generous with regard to hospitals. He left 40s. for prayers to the master of St. Thomas's Hospital and smaller sums to every priest, nun, nurse, and patient connected with the institution. St. Anthony, Elsingspital (a priory and, touchingly enough, a hospital specializing in the care of the blind), Bedlam without Bishopsgate, and St. Mary's Hospital near Westminster also benefited from his will, as did the inmates of every leper-house in the suburbs of London.

For the service of the altar in the chapel of St. John the Baptist, where his body was to be interred, the poet left two robes, one of white silk, the other of blue baudkin, "a costly stuff with web of gold and woof of silk," as well as a new dish and chalice and a new missal. To the prior and convent he left
a large book, a Martyrology, which he had commissioned for them and which they were to have on the condition that a special mention of him be inscribed in it every day.

To his wife, Agnes, Gower left one hundred pounds as well as the following accessories and furnishings: three cups, one "cooperculum" or coverlet, two salt-cellars and twelve silver spoons, all beds, chests, and furniture of hall, pantry and kitchen, and all their vessels and utensils, and one chalice and one robe for the altar of the oratory in his dwelling— the possessions, in other words, of a very well-to-do man. His wife also became heir to his manors of Southwell (presumably the Feltwell discussed above, p. 22,) and Moulton. Neither the size of these properties nor their income is specified. The five executors of the will were Gower's wife, Arnold Savage, Knight, Roger, Esquire, William Denne, Canon of the king's Chapel, and John Burton, Clerk.

It is interesting to know that Gower was a prosperous and honored man, albeit a blind and sickly one, when it came time for him to die; that he apparently was not survived by any offspring; that he was devout and a great believer in the efficacy of prayer, purchased or otherwise. His will tells us all these things. And yet all of them could have been equally true of many of his peers. Here, as everywhere in the records of the Middle
Ages, the private citizen remains anonymous as far as his daily life is concerned.

However, the obscurity that quickly shrouded Gower's private life did not overtake his literary reputation for more than two hundred years. As an author, only Chaucer equalled him in the admiration of his contemporaries and his successors. Chaucer himself, in what seemed for a time to be a mutual-admiration arrangement, dedicated his Troilus to his fellow poet, as well as to the "philosophical" Strode; and Gower praised Chaucer in the Confessio Amantis. James I dedicated the Kingis Quair to both poets, and Hoccleve, like James, calls Gower "my maister."

The metrical translator of Boethius, John Walton of Osney, writes with conventional but justified modesty:

And Gower, that so craftely doth trete
As in his book (es) of moralite,
Though I to hem in makinge am unmete,
Yit moste I schewe it forth that is in me.

Bokenham, in his Lives of the Saints, refers to Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate time and again as the three great lights of English literature. Hawes also makes Gower one of the same literary trinity. Caxton's edition of the Confessio Amantis, printed in 1483, was apparently a "best-seller" of the late fifteenth century. And Berthelette, another fifteenth century printer, introduced the same work with warm praise of its author's pure English and his
During the Elizabethan period Gower's popularity seems not to have waned at all. Macaulay has counted thirty illustrative quotations from Gower in Ben Jonson's *English Grammar*, compared to twenty-five from Chaucer, and fourteen each from Lydgate and Sir Thomas More. In Robert Greene's *Vision* the poet is introduced, with Chaucer, as one of the two accepted representatives of the "pleasant and sententious styles in story-telling." Most impressive of all, Gower himself appears on the stage to act as Prologue to four of five acts in the partly Shakesperian play, *Pericles*, where he speaks in his own octosyllabic couplet. The *Confessio Amantis* was presumably "so well known and the author so well established in reputation, that a play evidently gained credit by connecting itself with his name."  

The details recounted in the preceding pages are as close as we can come to facts concerning Gower's life and literary reputation. In the case of the life, some of the "facts" are at best questionable, and others tell us next to nothing. There are, however, a few additional conjectures that we can safely make about the circumstances of his life, even though there is little documentary evidence to support them. For example, it is possible to claim for Gower most of the literary acquaintances that are claimed for Chaucer, at least those writers of importance who
lived in London. The circumstances of time, place, rank, and special interest which combined to make Gower the acquaintance of Chaucer must also have brought him into contact with such men as Thomas Usk, who, like Gower, treated the subject of courtly love; Henry Scogan, the future tutor of Henry IV's sons; and Ralph Strode, with whom Gower shares the dedication in Chaucer's Troilus. In his younger days, when some of his Cinkante Balades were probably composed, he may also have met Froissart, who was in England at the time, although Gower's own ballades reflect little of the French poet's influence. As for Wycliffe, if Gower knew him it is not likely that they were on friendly terms. Gower could denounce the evils of his time as vigorously as any social critic, but he lacked Wycliffe's revolutionary temperament; and he hated Lollardy, with which Wycliffe's name was to be associated, more passionately than the abuses which it attacked.

Other matters, for example his omnivorous reading (which, with his writing, could easily explain the fact that he was blind at the turn of the century), his intense religiosity, and his political opinions, will be discussed in later chapters. For the moment it is enough to visualize Gower not predominantly as poet, moralist, or scholar, but as very much the man-of-affairs --surrounded by persons of consequence and on speaking terms with kings; deeply involved in matters which, however, unclear
to us, were of an unmistakably commercial kind; accustomed to the circumstances of a prosperous life, though not given to frills; and almost aggressively sure of himself in his reactions to the many-hued world of which he was very much a part. All in all, it is a more attractive picture than that of the querulous, aged doom-crier of whom we too often think when his name is mentioned.
CHAPTER I

FOOTNOTES


2. Works, IV, xxiv.


4. Before him, Thynne, in his Animadversions, had rejected Leland's statement because of the difference in the coat of arms.

5. Works, IV, x.


7. Retrospective Review, N.S., II (1828), 103-117.


10. Works, I, xliii.


15. Works, IV, xxiii.

In De Pacis Commendatione in praise of Henry IV, Gower says that in the first year of Henry's reign he became blind. And in the MSS of the Vox Clamantis he states that in the second year of Henry's reign he ceased to write because he was blind. Henry was crowned in October, 1399, so 1400 might be called either the first or second year of his reign.

In later MSS this reference was deleted when Gower could no longer support Richard's policies.

Fisher, record no. 78. Fisher suggests that this gift may have been made on receipt of a manuscript version of the CA dedicated to Henry.

Fisher, p. 22.


Gower does, however, praise the potentiality for good of the lawyer's craft (VC, VI, ii).

Macaulay, in a somewhat contradictory footnote, admits the possible significance of this line; Works, I, xxvi, note.

Gower does, in fact, praise the wool trade in particular. But even so there is not much difference between his most gentle and his most severe criticisms.

As for Leland, his dependability as a source is somewhat strengthened by Fisher's research, as noted below.


Fisher, record no. 52.

Works, IV, xxv.

Works, loc. cit.

See the comments on the subject of Gower's villainy below, p. 17.

32 Fisher, record no. 10.

33 Fisher, record no. 37.

34 Ibid., p. 14.

35 Ibid., records no. 34-46.

36 Ibid., record no. 56.

37 In June of the same year Gower also acquired the yearly rent of £10 from the Septvaun manor of Wygebergh, Essex, mentioned above.

38 Including one John de Brokhull, presumably a relative of Thomas Brokhull who in 1377 released lands in Kent to Sir John Freebody, rector of Bocton Aluph, and John Gower (Fisher, record no. 60).

39 Fisher, record no. 53.

40 Notably on the evidence of Sir John Freebody, apparently the same man who, with Gower, received lands from Brokhull (see note 38, above). In other words, the same Freebody who testified against Gower in 1365 was his partner in 1377.

41 Works, IV, xv.

42 Fisher discounts this idea. The Cobham link between the transactions concerning both Aldyngton and Kentwell seems to him conclusive proof that in both cases it is the poet who is involved.

43 Fisher, p. 17.

44 Ibid., record no. 53. William de Chirchehull and Sir Nicholas de Loveyne are described in the report as the chief influences on the heir, but Gower is also mentioned.

45 Ibid., record no. 54.
Actually the will mentions Southwell and Moulton; both Macaulay and Morley failed in their attempts to identify any manor named Southwell. According to Fisher, "Southwell" was almost certainly a scribal error, and "Feltwell" was the name intended. (Fisher, p. 21.)

Fisher, p. 18.

Macaulay himself suggests as much.

Eileen Power, Medieval People (New York, 1924), p. 166.

Consider the following translated excerpt from the Mirour (25360 ff.): "O wool, noble dame, thou art the goddess of merchants, to serve thee they are all ready; by thy good fortune and thy wealth thou makest some mount high, and others thou bringest to ruin . . . Thou art cherished throughout the world, and the land where thou art born may do great things by reason of thee. Thou art carried throughout the world by land and sea, but thou goest to the wealthiest men . . . ". (Ibid., p. 129.)

Fisher, record no. 77.

Ibid., record no. 81. Fisher cites two other memorandums of mainprise in which a John Gower is mentioned, but there is no evidence that these involve the poet.

Ibid., p. 23.

Works, IV, xvii.

Morley, op. cit., p. 158.

The cumulative effect of this list gives the reader an interesting insight into the atmosphere of the Gower household. See Power, for example, on the subject of such items as medieval beds, (op. cit., p. 167).


This and the following references are cited from Works, IV, viii-x.
59 Skelton, irascible and independent as always, remarks in Phillip Sparrow: "Gower's Englysh is old/ And of no value is told, /
His mater is worth gold/ And worthy to be enrold." In Garden of Laurel, he is more unreserved in his praise.

60 Works, IV, viii.

61 Works, I, lxxiv.

62 Gower tells us he has simple tastes. He prefers plain meats, for example, to pheasants, swans and the like (Mir. 26293 ff.) but it is clear that his taste is a matter of choice, not necessity.

63 He is as sure of himself when he declares himself master of his own household (Mir. 4186 ff.) as when he criticizes the sovereigns under whom he lives.
II

GOWER: THE CONSCIENCE OF THE TIMES

Historians are almost universally susceptible to a bias, determinist in character, which Gower himself would have been the first to object to: with their long backward looks, they usually begin and end by defining any given age as the incubation period of the age that was to follow it. The Middle Ages have been peculiarly vulnerable to this treatment; their very name suggests an interim period; and even now, when we really know better, it is still a common habit of mind to think of them as the aftermath of the Classical Age or as the prelude to the Renaissance. We must keep reminding ourselves that men living in fourteenth-century England, for example, were by no means aware that theirs was a transitional age— at least not in the historian’s sense of the word. They did not know that in Edward III’s reign “the Reformation was already definitely in sight.”¹ It would have shocked them to learn that the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381 was the first pitched battle between Labor and Capital; nor did they recognize that Calais was the first of England’s many colonies; nor that such
developments as their half-conscious spirit of nationalism, and
the Great Plague of 1349, and the rise of a new class of powerful
merchants, had already sounded the death knell of the feudal system;
least of all did they suspect that their growing impatience with a
wayward clergy, their willingness to appropriate its lands and
tithes, would eventually help to bring down the edifice of medieval
Catholicism about their heads. The very thought of most of these
developments would have convinced those good people of what they
already more or less believed: that the day of judgment, not a
renaissance, was at hand.

Gower would not have been--was not--an exception in this
respect. If he foresaw anything beyond the immediate future, it
was, in fact, that very Doomsday and the Last Judgment that
would follow. He was even a bit obsessed with the subject,
particularly in Book VII of the Vox Clamantis, where he describes
with gusto and graphic detail the hour of our death, when our eyes
are fixed and our tongues silent; or when he dwells on the ever-
lasting torments of the damned; or when he acknowledges the
perishability of all that the world holds dear. Beyond this, it
was quite enough for him to cope with things as they were. Even
in this, he gave up at the last, or at least claimed that such was
his intention:
I may noght streche up to the hevene
Min hand, ne setten al in evene
This world, which evere is in balance:
It stant noght in my sufficance
So grete thinges to compasse,
Bot I mot lete it overpasse
And treten upon othre thinges.

(CA, I, 1-7.)

Actually, Gower was too much the mentor, the moralist, to ab­
dicate that role entirely, even in the Confessio Amantis, the least
didactic of his works. There is even an incorrigible optimism
implicit in his persistent efforts to persuade his fellow men that they
must take a straighter way. He cannot give up the effort although
he is convinced that it is useless.

Intellectually, however, Gower was a pessimist. Despite
his emotional anger at the way of the world, which gives life to
the Mirour de l'Ommme and the Vox Clamantis, and despite his
determined and successful attempt to be entertaining in the
Confessio Amantis, his work is nevertheless permeated with an
abiding despair, from which this world, at least, offers no
escape. What is even the Confessio Amantis, after all, but the
story of an aging lover who receives, by way of absolution, the
death of love?

For all of Chaucer's jolly millers and "parfit knyghts,"
this pessimism was the true intellectual currency of the age.
To some extent it was, in Gower, an anglicized and less elegant
precursor of that continental Weltschmerz of which Huizinga writes:
A sombre melancholy weighs on people's souls. Whether we read a chronicle, a poem, a sermon, a legal document even, the same impression of immense sadness is produced by them all. It would sometimes seem as if this period had been particularly unhappy. . . . It was, so to say, bad form to praise the world and life openly. It was fashionable to see only its suffering and misery, to discover everywhere signs of decadence and of the near end—in short, to condemn the times or to despise them. 3

But as for Gower, there was considerably more than fashion to dictate his outlook; more, even, than the influence of religion, about which something will be said later. Gower was very much the citizen of the world, too involved in it, as we have seen, to allow himself the luxury of reacting to its apparent decadence with ennui or the stereotyped pratings of the recluse or the misanthrope. The pervasive pessimism, for all that it was "in the air," had causes that were tangible enough; and these, to some extent, explain the dark cast of Gower's thoughts, as they do, to varying degrees, the visions of Langland, the complaints of Richard de Bury, and the heresies of Wycliffe. All of these men were convinced that the world that they knew was organically ill and dying of its illness. But Gower's is the most authentically medieval of their laments because, for one thing, he sees no lasting remedy, and, for another, the palliatives, the temporary reforms that he suggests, far from being progressive, are actually retrogressive in character. Says he:
If I schal drawe in to my mynde
The tyme passed, thanne I fynde
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 knyghtode in pris be name,
Wherof the wyde worldes fame
Write in Cronique is yit withholde.

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

(CA. Prol. 93-100, 118-121)

The evocation of a bygone age, of "the good old days" to
which the present world can not be compared, was, of course, a
literary convention in Gower's time; but it was also a symptom
of a dying world. If one is to appreciate Gower's dark but
fascinating vision of life, one should keep in mind the fact that,
like almost all of his more sensitive contemporaries, he was
aware that his age was most characterized by this old order
waning rather than by the new order being born. The signposts of
the world's disintegration were everywhere apparent. A great
upsurge in the expression of social discontent was occurring,
most of it on levels which the literary and social historians have
generally ignored--the sermon, the ballad, the folk-tale, "a rude
mountain torrent" as Professor Owst calls it, "rushing half­
concealed in its rocky bed which ceaselessly feeds and links up
the grander lakes of our medieval literature." Even natural
calamities, "acts of God" as we still call them, were themselves protests; events like the Black Death of 1349, and the other plagues which followed throughout the century, were thought to be the expressions in outraged nature of mankind's folly and the omens of the imminent end of the world. Man had only himself to blame for them:

And Conscience with a Crois com for to preche.
He preide the peple have pite of hem-selve,
And preved that this pestilences weore for puire synne.

We shall investigate Gower's own attitude towards nature in a later chapter; certainly the already quoted lines expressed his general feeling. As for the "puire synne," the poet was convinced that it had infected every level of society. Nevertheless, Gower's ideas of what constituted social evils might seem surprising to a modern reader oriented to the customary "historical" point of view. This most "moral" of poets would find few champions of his morality in our own time. It is an interesting exercise to view the current events of the fourteenth century through Gower's critical but unprophetic eyes. There were not many issues of the times that escaped his notice.

If Macaulay's conclusion is correct, that the Mirour de l'Oomme was composed between 1376 and 1379, Gower must have been wielding his pen in an attack on the last years of Edward III's
reign before the aged monarch was fairly cold in his grave. The Mirour, in its broad outline, treats of the fourteenth century world in a very general way: there is the standard catalogue of vices and virtues (ll. 841--18378); a commentary on the various estates of man (ll. 18421--26604); another on man's sinfulness as the cause of corruption in the world (ll. 26605--27360); and a primer on the ways by which man may win salvation. But these general and commonplace themes are shot through with the poet's own fire, aimed at more specific targets. In the section dealing with the estates of Man, Gower passes the whole of Christendom in review, rank after rank, from the court of Rome on down. One order after another is condemned, none more forcefully than the clergy. Sin is the ruling force in the world.

Je dis, ensi comme l'autre gent,
Qe plus sont fortes les malices,
Sique Pecché communement
Par tout governe a son talent
L'escoles et les artefices.
(Mir. 18416--18420.)

But it is interesting to note that, during the lines that follow, in which Gower manages to denounce the entire clergy from Pope to lowly friar (ll. 18421--21780), he also comes to the defense of the Church and its possessions, which were, even at this time, threatened with heavy taxation at the hands of Parliament. The French wars had been renewed in 1369, and these profitless expeditions were
anathema to Gower, particularly in so far as they made it necessary for the king to call upon Parliament for more and still more money, and that agency, with the backing of the Lancastrian party, in turn demanded that the property of the Church be taxed. Since Gower himself was a non-cleric and the owner of secular lands, he must have felt through his own pocketbook the burden of the king's wars. In opposing Parliament, then, he seems to have been acting on principle, a very conservative principle, against his pecuniary interests. He did not know it, but in opposing Parliament's levies on the Church, he was also opposing the historians, who are accustomed to see in those exactions an indirect means whereby the liberties of England were advanced.

On other matters concerning the reign of Edward III, Gower's attitude is just as conservative, if more predictable. For example, there is the indictment of the relationship between the king and Alice Perrers. The fact that the young lady was the comforter of Edward II in his last years might not have provoked any special comment from Gower; but the histrionics with which she played out her role, and, worse, the king's indulgence of her, were the scandal of the realm. Gover was not the one to let the matter pass.

Alice Perrers, like Chaucer's wife, had been commended
to Edward's care by his dying queen, and the result of his solicitude had been disastrous. The court went in fear of her. She became, at times, almost the only intermediary between the ruler and his people. Even magistrates in the court had to yield to her judgments. Perhaps worst of all, from Gower's point of view, her sympathies were with the Lancastrian party of the unpopular John of Gaunt.

In the *Mirour de l'Omme*, Gower criticizes this situation under the thinnest of disguises. Fairly enough, he indicts not only Alice Perrers, but also the king who indulged her. He uses the Biblical story of the king whose pages try to outdo each other in answering his question, "What is strongest?" One answer is that women are. Gower does not waste his chance:

Mais ly secondes respondy
Qe femmes sont plus fort de luy;
Car femmes scievont Roy danter.
(Mir. 22777--779.)

But this is only the beginning:

Vior dist qui femme est puissant,
Et ce voit om du maintenant:
Dieus pense de les mals guarir,
Q'as toutes lays est disordant,
Qe femme en terre soit regnant,
Et Rois soubgit pour luy servir.
Rois est des femmes trop decu,
Quant plus les ayme que son dieu,
Dont laist honour pour foldelit:
Cil Rois ne serra pas cemmu,
Q'ensi voet laisser son escu
Et querre le bataille ou lit.
(Mir. 22807--22818.)

"That king will not be feared who wants to leave his shield and seek battle in bed." This is rather strong language with which to criticize a king, but a just comment, it would seem, on an intolerable situation.

Gower's reaction to the Peasant Uprising of 1381 is the best known of his references to contemporary events, and, once again, his attitude is at variance with that of the social historians. The revolt of the peasants had its origins in such events as the Plague, after which Labor, for perhaps the first time, found itself in a seller's market; and it had its immediate causes in the excessive taxes enforced by the counsellors of the young Richard II. These socio-economic influences were not, however, the causes of the uprising according to John Gower. His own explanation of them is more subjective and yet more true to the understanding of his age. As far as he was concerned, there was no possibility of the sympathetic view with which later writers were to treat the rebellion. It was, he believed, one more symptom of the general corruption of the times, as much a disruption of the natural order (that is, of God's order) as the plague had been. The beast-allegory by means of which he describes that disruption in the first part of the *Vox Clamantis* is better understood—and becomes
creatively the more impressive—if we keep this point of view in mind. For Gower, the uprising of the peasantry was as unimaginable as an uprising of the animal kingdom—and as perverse. His reaction, a cry of unaffected horror and dismay, goes much deeper than the prejudices of a particular class, although those prejudices undoubtedly played their part in justifying it. It is, most of all, the realization of a world that is out of joint, at odds with all that in the medieval mind constituted order and truth.

We can only guess at the effect of the uprising on the poet's personal life. The disturbances began in the countries of Kent and Essex, in both of which Gower had property, and they quickly spread to London itself, where he was presumably living at the time. At one point in his account, Gower describes himself, along with all men of station and learning, as fleeing to the woods and fields to escape the vengeance of the mob. A poetic invention, perhaps, but on the other hand, when one considers the poet's rank and his sympathies, it is plausible enough to picture him among the dispossessed and hunted refugees. Certainly it would help to explain the controlled but passionate rage that colors his account.

In any case, his description of the rebellion, even in translation, is a fascinating one, the more so because it seems to be entirely original with him. This is not the place, nor I the
qualified person, to speak in any detail of the literary merits of the Vox Clamantis. Among those who have already discussed the value of its Latin there seems to be considerable disagreement; to some extent, the opinions of different scholars seem to be dependent on whether their familiarity with Latin is with the classical or the medieval variety. However, the artistry of Gower's concept of the work—particularly of Book I—does not require the knowledge of a Latinist; and a brief mention of it here is of some relevancy to a later discussion of the organization of the Confessio Amantis—the more so because it has received little attention heretofore. I have already remarked on the appropriateness of the beast-allegory and its relation to the outrage which, in Gower's view, the uprising had done to the natural order. How fitting, then, that on the morning of the day preceding the poet's dream vision, a strange light should break in the West, and the sun should rise from that quarter. Yet this strange and ominous note does not prevent the day from being one of great beauty, the conventional but lovely spring day of all the medieval poets, in which a bright sun shines on meadows, flowers, and flocks, and the air rings with the song of birds, and "the innocent rural maiden plucked violets to deck herself out; the earth bore them, although no one had sown them. There were as many hues as nature affords, and the ground was splendidly embroidered with different blooms"
(VC, I, 58-62). The contrast between this charming but already tainted scene, and the dark, savage dream which follows, is as striking as it is deliberate. In that dream, men are transformed into beasts, but they behave as neither man nor beast is supposed to. The asses gallop over the fields, demanding to be horses; the oxen refuse to bear their yokes; the swine ravage like wolves, and join together "to tear up the soil the more." Even wasps make "a roar like a bristling lion." Here the very passion of Gower's feelings gives life to the didactic intent. It is impossible to be indifferent to his vision, however biased it may seem by twentieth-century standards. Indeed, even the bias is largely the result of Gower's choice of language. The facts, to the extent that he relates them, are usually fairly accurate. Thus, for example, his not necessarily flattering description of the stunned reaction of the upper classes, in which all contemporary accounts agree:

Confused by the great terror of such sudden destruction, the nobility scarcely knew whether its own class existed. The nobleman fled and wandered about and there were no places quite safe either in the ramparts of the city or in woodland retreats... The noble went now here, now there, like a rain cloud in motion, yet there was no sure safety... But the woods were even frightened by the woods, the fields by fields, and city by city; one place did not know how to regard another. (VC, I, l198-1209.)

Even more graphic, more impassioned, is the protracted, pain-
fully detailed picture of Archbishop Sudbury's bloody end on
Tower Hill at the hands of the mob:

Hasten here, old man, gather together here, fair youths, see the criminal wars the peasant waged. Strike your breast, shed your tears, lament for the body whose unheard-of death may be thus described. . . . Alas! For death raged at the scared altars, and the high priest stood in less esteem than a head of cattle.

(VC, I, 1138-45.)

It is still possible to read these pages with a fascination that has more to do with the almost biblical intensity of feeling that pervades them than with the events that are recorded. It is all very powerful propaganda, the more so in that it was genuinely felt; at times it seems to simulate the raging movements of the mob, or a storm-tossed sea.

It is into a sea, in fact, that the mob is presently transformed (VC, I, xvii, xviii, xix, xx) when the beast-allegory has served its purpose. Now a more general allegorical significance is introduced. The dreamer finds himself upon a storm-threatened ship. Gower handles this transition with considerable skill. The ship is first used to represent the Tower of London, in which all the leaders of the realm have taken refuge, the poet along with them. Yet once the rebellion is quelled, it requires but slight expansion of the allegorical meaning to transform the ship, that is, the tower with its beleaguered heads of state, into a representation of the state itself—the first use in English literature, so far as I know, of the
"ship of state" device. 13 Now the water--the mob--is calm, new sails are put on, and the sailors "rushed forth together and each hastened to perform his duty" (VC, I, 1902). Order has been temporarily restored. But Gower has begun to move from the particular event to the more general estimation of the human condition which is the subject of all the subsequent books of the Vox Clamantis. As we might expect, his conclusions are not very reassuring. At this point, his ship and sea lose their allegorical significance entirely, in a shifting of emphasis which, in contrast to the previous one, is without art. The ship has become a real ship, and Gower has become a Gulliver. The ship sets sail, again is beset by billowing waves, and is driven to harbor at an island "more oppressive than Scylla" (VC, I, xx). In this island--once called the Island of Brut, in case we did not guess--dwell a wild people. This fact the dreamer learns from one of its more talkative inhabitants. These people are "fair of form, but see, they have more fierceness than a wolf's cruel nature. They do not fear laws, they overthrow right by force, and justice falls in defeat because of their violent warfare." (VC, I, 1970-1972). The native adds, as a wistful afterthought, that he does not think "there would be a worthier people from sunrise to sunset, if there were mutual love among them." The evil, in other words, does not stem from a political or economic cause, but from the breakdown of the ethical, patristic idea of charity, that
is, brotherly love. Gower sees no lasting remedy for man's failure. Only the voice of God can dispel his gloom, or at least mitigate it. The Deity advises him to adopt as an attitude a curious mixture of fatalistic stoicism, caution, and opportunistic alertness. And when the dreamer awakens from his dream, the effects of his vision are still very much with him. The world has resumed the outward semblance of order, but Gower is not very reassured. Remembering his dream, he remarks that "A shipwrecked man is afraid of even calm seas" (VC, I, 2074). He will not be deceived. The peasant is only lying in wait to wreck havoc again; the nightmare vision is a presage of the future. So Gower, in order to relieve his troubled mind, turns to the task of writing the Vox Clamantis, in which the causes of the evil that roams the world will be sought among the estates of man. Despite the slight traces in the second book which betray its earlier composition, it and the subsequent books follow naturally from the belatedly added Book I, which, as a sort of stage setting, serves its purpose admirably.

Characteristically, Gower not only made additions to his work, but emended it from time to time in order to deal with changing events. In the Vox Clamantis, one such change was prompted by the papal schism which began in 1378. Book III was apparently completed before that date, but in an intermediate
version of the poem Gower altered the first twenty-nine lines in
order to take this new development into account. He uses it as a
starting point for his wholesale attack on the clergy:

The schism of today shows plainly that there
are two popes, one schismatic and the other the
proper one. France favors the schismatic and
declares that he ought to be revered, but England
everywhere preserves the right faith. . . . Every
rule of Christ rejects the delights of the world,
but prelates now sin in this respect. Christ was
poor, but they are overloaded with gold. . . .
Christ was meek, but their empty showiness makes
them arrogant. He used to make peace, but now
they wage wars. (VC, III, 4-15.)

Stockton remarks that Gower's attitude was "typical of
English sentiment at the time of the schism. . . . The popes of
Avignon were under the influence of France, England's traditional
enemy." However, when, some twelve years later, Gower takes
up again his complaints concerning the papal schism, this time in
the Confessio Amantis, he is curiously unwilling to specify which
is the true Pope:

If Ethna brenne in the clergie,
Al openly to mannes ye
At Avynoun theexperience
Therof hath yove an evidence
Of that men son hem so divided.
And yit the cause is noght decided;
But it is seid and evere schal
Betwen tuo Stoles lyth the fal,
Whan that men wenen best to sitte:
In holy cherche of such a slitte
Is for to rewe un to ous alle;
God grante it mote well befalle
Towardes him which hath the trowthe.

(CA, Pf.ol. 329-341)
Gower's criticism of the papal schism is, however, fairly general. Not so his treatment of his temporal ruler, Richard II. This is one of the few instances in which the opinionated poet can be seen to change his mind, not only in the interval between one work and the next, but in subsequent "editions" of the same work. His bold criticism of Richard, even more than his post-mortem rebuke of Edward III, is worth considering in some detail, since it has some bearing on the poet's distinctly medieval conception of kingship.

Gower begins by being not only tolerant but indulgent of the boy king. In the Vox Clamantis the relevant passages are to be found in Book VI, vii and xviii. Gower must have written the first version of this section shortly after Richard, at the age of ten years, had come to the throne. The child was provided with a Council of Regency, consisting of the Chancellor, the Treasurer, two bishops, two earls, two baronets, and four knights. It was a troubled time, with France and Spain raiding English coasts, the expensive expeditions of John of Gaunt coming to naught, and the Scots breaking truce—these developments all resulting in heavier and heavier taxes, and, presently, a more and more rebellious Parliament and unrest and rebellion among the peasants. When Gower first reviewed these events it was the Council that caught his ire:
A mob of flatterers proceeds to the forefront of the royal court, and the court cedes them what they order to be done. But the court banishes those who dare to speak the truth, and does not allow such people to be at the king's side. The boy is free of blame, but those who have instumented this boyish reign shall not endure without a fall. So not the king but his council is the cause of our sorrow, for which the land grieves as if with a general murmur. If the king were of mature age, he would set right the scale which now is without justice.

(VC, VI, 551-561.)

And in a later passage he writes the words that were to seem so hollow to him in the years to come:

May God himself guide his/7he king's7 youthfulness and prolong it forever and always direct his actions for the better. May no council have the power to influence you, O king, and may no betrayer of yours have the power to exist in this land.

(VC, VI, 1166-1172.)

The king had not grown very much older before Gower began to change his tune; and his denunciation of the disappointing Richard in his revised version of Book VI is extraordinary in view of the period during which it was written and his own proximity to the court. The time for excuses is past, the conciliatory lines are emended, and now the poet says:

The king, an undisciplined boy, neglects the moral behavior by which a man might grow up from a boy. Indeed, youthful company so sways the boy that he has a taste for nothing practical, unless it is his whim. The young men associated with him want what he wants; he enters upon a course of action and they follow him. Vainglory makes
youthful comrades vain, for which reason they cultivate the royal quarters the more. . . . A king ought to weigh carefully the kingdom's laws, which are entrusted to him, and he ought to withhold justice from no man. Nevertheless, there is a cry nowadays among the people that because law is failing, wrongdoing claims to be its own justification. . . . Therefore, O king, . . . restore our common justice, now lost; bring law back to the realm, and banish all crime.

(VC, VI, 555-561, 1176-1187.)

For a subsequent period of a few years, roughly 1386 through 1390, Gower must have felt that matters had taken a turn for the better. During this time the king's council was disbanded by the lords appellant and parliament, and a less spendthrift, more national policy was adopted by the king. When the youthful Richard encountered the aging Gower boating on the Thames, probably in 1389 or 1390, and bade him write something of love, the poet seemed to be quite reconciled to his sovereign. He was still eager to give him advice, but he was equally glad to praise him. In the manuscripts of the first recension, the Confessio Amantis is dedicated to Richard with a sincerity predicated, if not on admiration, at least on hope. The striking change of tone is worth reproducing at some length:

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Upon mi bare knees I preye,
That God my worthi king conveye,
Richard by name the Secocinde,
In whom hath evere yit be founde
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Justice medled with pite,  
Largesce forth with charite.  
In his persone it mai be schewed  
What is a king to be wel thewed,  
Touchinge of pite namely:  
For he yit nevere unpitously  
Ayein the liges of his lond,  
For no defaute which he fond,  
Thurgh cruelte vegaunce soghte.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Mi worthi prince, of whom I write,  
Thus stant he with himselfe clier,  
And doth what lith in his power  
Not only hier at hom to seke  
Love and acord, but outward eke,  
As he that save his people wolde.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
And so to make his regne stable,  
With al the wil that I mai yive  
I preie and schal whil that I live,  
As I which in subjeccioun  
Stonde under the proteccioun,  
And mai miselven bot bewelde,  
What for seknesse and what for elde,  
Which I receyve of Goddes grace.  
But thogh me lacke to purchace  
Mi kinges thonk as by decerte,  
Yit the Simplesce of mi povertie  
Unto the love of my ligance  
Desireth forto do plesance:  
And for this cause in myn entente  
This povere bok heer I presente  
Unto his hihe worthinesse.

(CA, VIII, 2985-3051,)

It would be decidely unfair to ascribe much of the above eulogy  
to obsequiousness on Gower's part; he was as free of that vice  
as anyone in his time and place could be, as we shall see. In  
the praise we must read the hope.

The hope, however, was shortlived. In July, 1390, the Earl
of Derby, later Henry IV, but already a hero to Gower, left for Prussia, possibly because he had again fallen into royal disfavor. The king had apparently lost his fear of his people and had begun to make that bid for absolute power which would cost him his crown and his life. In rapid succession, Gower deleted each reference to Richard in the later manuscripts of his work. First the concluding eulogy just cited was removed, and a more general commentary on the requisites of kingship was put in its place. Two years later, the opening narrative, in which Richard is mentioned as instigator of the work, was also deleted, and a new dedication composed, this one to Henry of Lancaster:

This bok, upon amendment
To stonde at his commandement,
With whom myn herte is of accord,
I send unto myn oghne lord,
Which of Lancastre is Henri named;
The hyhe god him hath proclaimed
Ful of knyhthode and alle grace.

(CA, Prol., 83-89.)

In the Latin Cronica Tripertita, which Gower wrote after Henry IV's accession and which deals joyfully with that subject and with the iniquities of Richard II, the poet expressed the conviction that Richard's fall was due mostly to his cruelty and treachery, and that it had been destined from the earliest years of his reign. Richard had failed to rule virtuously as a king because he had failed to live virtuously as a man.
A clear idea of Gower's conception of kingship emerges from his work. What it amounts to is a pragmatic and compressed restatement of the best medieval thought on the subject. In general outline it has much in common with Aquinas's *De Regimine Principum* and Dante's *De Monarchia*. Even more, however, it echoes the earlier requisites set forth by John of Salisbury, in the *Policraticus*, for the making of an ideal monarch. It is feudal doctrine in the truest sense. The ruler is less a personality than an institution and, as such, he is dependent not on men for his authority but on the God-inspired laws that give that institution its meaning and its purpose. Of course, he should heed his advisors and the voice of people in practical matters, but these are only points of reference whereby he may better understand the laws he should represent. If Gower at the last favored the overthrow of Richard, it was not because he was motivated by any democratic inclinations. As George Coffman remarks: "Whenever one turns to Gower's writings and studies them in their fourteenth century historical relationship, he will find the poet repeatedly going through the same cycle: a ruler is responsible for the welfare of England and for its morality in civic, religious, and political life as exemplified in the individual citizen. . . . He urges all rulers to rely on good counsel and sound judgment and not on progress through parliamentary procedure for developing representative government."
As far as Gower was concerned, Richard was an evil king because he failed to fulfill the requirements of his absolute power and not, as historical hindsight would suggest, because he sought power to which he was not entitled. With some not-too-accurate hindsight of his own, the poet at one point sighs eloquently for "the tyme past" when

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 people stod in obeissan ce
Under the reule of governance,
And pes, which ryhtwisnesse keste,
With charite tho stod in reste.

(CA, Prol., 102-109.)

Richard II does not deserve the "privilege of regalie" because, far from being too authoritarian, he cannot even fulfill the requirements of authority to the extent of mastering himself:

For if a kyng wol justifie
His lond and hem that beth withynne,
First at hym self he mot begynne,
To kepe and reule his owne astat,
That in hym self be no debat
Toward his god.

(CA, VIII, 3080-85.)

T. F. Tout, in his Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England, 23 points out that in fourteenth-century England power and wealth gradually extended to include not only the great land holders but lesser ones like Gower. This larger bourgeois governing class was very conservative. It believed in conventional
religion, stability, less avarice on the part of the king, and a strong monarch who listened to the advice of his elders. But one should resist the idea that Gower was merely the spokesman of a particular stratum in the society of his day. For one thing, he never confines himself to a defense of his own class interests in his writings. We have already seen him in opposition to those interests at one point. More important, however, is his concern for the welfare of all of the social organism. No estate is spared from his criticism, including his own. His point of view, conservative as it is, is better understood as encompassing virtually all the characteristics which distinguish the medieval attitude from any other.

It is as a feudal hierarchy that Gower reviews society, first in the Mirour, then in the Vox Clamantis, and finally in the Prologue to the Confessio Amantis. In the last, the roll call of the orders of men is more quickly concluded than in the earlier works, but the pessimistic mood is the same. For all the poet's avowed purpose to entertain, not admonish, nothing has changed in the world at large. As the head is corrupt, so also is the body of the state. The Church, once the good example that the rest of mankind might follow, and the greatest influence for peace in the world, now
... hath set to make werre and striif
For worldes good, which may noghte laste.

(CA, Prol., 248-9.)

How can it be otherwise when at the very head of hold church

... such a slitte
Is for to rewe un to ous alle.

(CA, Prol., 338-9.)

From such a schism it is inevitable that all kinds of heresies
and this "new Secte of Lollardie" should spring forth. And the
commons is no better. Gower compares it to a stream which, in
a good society, keeps within its banks, but which, in these days,
"tobrecketh and renneth al aboute" (CA, Prol., 506-7.) And once
the orders of men fail to perform their proper functions as part
of the state, the state itself must inevitably begin to crumble:

Division aboven all
Is thing which makth the world to falle,
And evere hath do sith it began.

(CA, Prol., 967-9.)

In some of the most wistful lines that that often wistful man ever
wrote, Gower wishes that some new Arion might bring the world
to peace again, as once, long ago, the "Hare in pees stod with the
Hound":

So that the comun with the lord,
And lord with the comun also,
He sette in love bothe tuo
And putte awey melancolie

And if ther were such on now,
Which cowthe harpe as he tho dede,
He myhte availe in many a stede
To make pes wher now is hate.

(CA, Prol. 1066-9, 1072-5.)

But that is just a dream.

... . And now nomore,
As for to speke of this matiere,
Which non bot only god may stiere.

(CA, Prol. 1086-88.)

I will later discuss some of the poet's immediate literary
sources and their direct effect upon his work in another connection.

But it would be impossible to ascribe to any particular work or
works Gower's general attitude towards the individual man or the
social organization. The fact is that the poet's consciousness was,
like his works, saturated with ideas and beliefs that had their
flowering in almost every aspect of a somewhat earlier phase of
medieval culture. Thus, for example, Gower's ideas of the organic
nature of the state, with its three categories in one or another of
which "all men must find their place, their fundamental avocation,
responsibilities, privileges and general outlook, "25 are so wide­
spread that it would be useless to speak of his expression of them in
terms of literary sources. Like most of his contemporaries, he
conceived of the ideal temporal society as one in which the various
orders, each within its restricted sphere, worked for the good of
the whole by living virtuously, motivated by the Christian catalyst
of love. And like all of the social critics of his day, he was keenly
aware of the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality. He also
possessed in extreme the distinctively medieval faculty for distinguishing between institutions and the men that implement them. I have already mentioned the catholicity with which he lays about him, blasting the insufficiencies of all the ranks of men. But never, in the process, does he challenge the secular and spiritual institutions which these men were meant to support. So far, then, the poet is being representative of his age. Certainly most members of the king's Parliament, or most of the famous pulpit orators of the day, or most of the intelligensia--Chaucer, for example--would have seen eye-to-eye with him in theory. But, as subsequent events were to prove, there was a considerable disparity between the intellectual convictions of such men and the actual influence of their laws, their writings, their sermons. In their assault on its wayward citizens, these spokesmen of the age were undermining, all unwittingly, the walls of the feudal city. In this respect, Gower is almost unique in the very consistency of his conservatism. Fearless moralist and social critic that he is, he never confuses morality or criticism with liberalism. We have seen that in his attitude toward monarchy, his attacks on Edward III and Richard II are concerned with their weakness as feudal sovereigns, not their resistance to parliamentary reform. This same cast of mind is evident in his treatment of all the estates: he rebukes a licentious clergy, but hastens to their defense when Parliament, partly on
account of the same excesses, tries to curtail the power and wealth of the Church. As for the commons, Gower is not to be beguiled by that most egalitarian of questions,

When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?

even though it had long been taken up by a whole battery of reforming preachers. Not for him the democratic inclinations of Langland, or the humanistic insights of Chaucer, or the "lollardry" of Wycliffe. Even where his own middle class is concerned, he does not consider its separate identity— that is, as a fourth estate— though many of his contemporaries had begun to do so. In a word, the Renaissance and the Reformation had little to thank him for.

Most crucial in Gower's system of ethics is his belief that the individual man is responsible, not only for his own welfare, but that of society, in the act of living his private, moral life. Charitas, the aspiration towards the godly through individual perfection, is the only criterion of social, as of individual, virtue. Gower believed that the world and its institutions, in their natural (that is, godly) condition, are good. It is only man that has perverted them. Thus kingship is fine, and the more absolute the better. No connection is drawn by Gower between the absolutism of such power and the behavior of wicked kings. By the same token there is no cause-and-effect relationship between the aggrandizement of temporal wealth by the Church and the corruption of the clergy. So
it goes all along the line. The judges, not the laws, need changing. The chivalric ideal is as noble as ever, but knights are licentious and unvalorous. And as for the commons, Gower does not even consider the feudal system as the cause of its revolt, though in other connections he castigates land holders for their oppressive treatment of the poor.

Gower does not distinguish between the needs of Individual and Social Man. The latter is merely an enlargement of the former. In the Vox Clamantis (VII, viii) he deliberately uses the microcosm-macrocosm device to emphasize the identification of the one with the other. Thus, political, religious, and social reforms are inconceivable to the poet either on a legislative or revolutionary level. His sovereign remedy for the manifest ills that afflict the world is that each man in his individual life must be a more perfect Christian. This basic principle of medieval thought has never been sufficiently underlined by scholars in their discussions of the literature of the period. If it were, those distant centuries might impress us as being (in a way far deeper than was, say, the Romantic Age) a great age of individuality. In the most literal sense, the health of the entire social order depended, according to the point of view set forth by Gower, on the individual's personal virtues; and it was because these were lacking that the social order had become corrupt.

Gower is primarily a critic of society. Even in the Confessio
Amantis, when he is least often "in the pulpit" and most involved with characterization, he is not particularly interested in the foibles and vanities of individual personalities. He plays his most authentic role as the conscience of classes and kings. It is the more important, then, to remember that the estates of men are, on an ethical level, extensions of the individual's responsibilities to Christian morality. Gower's moral code, based on the patristic concept of free will abetted by divine grace, is the prerogative of the individual rather than of society in the modern sense of that word. In his examination of the three estates in the Mirour de l'Omme, the Vox Clamantis, and the Prologue of the Confessio Amantis, Gower is intent upon discovering who is responsible for the present sad state of the kingdom. His repeated conclusion: everyone; each separate person must share the blame. "I truly acknowledge," he says, "that whatever happens in the world, whether it be good or evil, we ourselves are the cause of it." Now and then, it is true, he gives lip-service to the fashionable aphorisms about Fortuna, the fickle, impulsive goddess of chance, but these utterances are invariably qualified as the opinion held by others, and it is always to the old theme that Gower returns:

For after that we falle and rise,  
The world arist and faith withal,  
So that the man is overal  
His own cause of wel and wo.
That we fortune clepe so
Out of the man himself it groweth.

(CA, Prol. 545-9.)

Clearly then, Chaucer's appellation, the "moral Gower," was no misnomer. It has always seemed an absurdity to me that attempts have been made to read some ironic undertone into the phrase, when the literal truth of it is so manifest in all of Gower's works. Less absurd, and more unfortunate, has been the inevitable image that the words conjure up of a pompous and stodgy "gray beard," inveighing with misanthropic and useless ardor against the world. No one can deny that there is at least some justice in that image. In his humorless, and often long-winded intensity, in his inability to see more than one side of the human condition, Gower does often become tiresome for long stretches at a time.

But this is only part of the truth, and the lesser part at that. Certainly, Gower's compatriots did not find him dull; his voice of a man crying out was scarcely less than the voice of Medieval England lamenting its own passing. The world was indeed dying—that is, the world that Gower understood and valued. In little more than a century it would be virtually gone. Gower was at once the conscience and the elegist of that world, perhaps the most authentic that it had. There was, true enough, a vast chorus, the "rude torrent," to echo his dark theme of a world gone wrong. But as I have indicated, that very chorus, not Gower, was to be instrumental
in the change at hand. To the end he remained tenaciously committed to the ideals of a feudal world. It is in that light that we must see his advice to kings, his pleas for "reform" among the states of men.

But in Gower's work even these reactionary themes are colored by a deeper pessimism, at least as far as earthly affairs are concerned. The vanity of earthly joy, the transience not only of human life but of all worldly orders, were among the poet's strongest convictions. Furthermore, there was no alternative for Gower to the medieval, Catholic belief that each man, through the free will he exercised in his personal life, accounted for the health or corruption of the larger organism of the state. This was a far more profound concept than the subsequent facile variations on the idea of the microcosm-macrocosm so typical of the Renaissance. Certainly it was not original with Gower. But his particular achievement—as a moralist—was to be the greatest, and the last, English poet in whom that idea really lived. Hence a part, at least, of his pessimism, for by the strict standard of that concept, man had unmistakably failed.

Thus, when Gower is being most medieval in his thought, as in this dark instance, he can be said, for once, to be prophetic. We may debate the merits of Gower's specialized ideal of individual
responsibility, but it is certain that the ideal itself, as an operative moral force in the world, did not long outlive the poet who had cherished it.
CHAPTER II

FOOTNOTES


2 Gower's morbidity is not in any way unusual. One is struck, for example, by the correspondences between the poet's word-pictures and those of the pulpitateers of the period. Cf. G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Cambridge, England, 1933), passim.


6 Works, I, xlii--xliii.

7 Gardiner Stillwell, "John Gower and the Last Years of Edward III," SP, XIV (1944), 454-471.

8 The apocryphal I Esdras, iii f.

9 In the Confessio Amantis, Gower uses the same story (VII, 1783--1984) at greater length, but without the emphasis on "king-tamers." In the Mirour, on the other hand, he is harder on women than is his source. Cf. Stillwell, op. cit., p. 460.

10 The only complete translation has been done by Eric W. Stockton. "Translation of the Vox Clamantis," unpublished diss. (Harvard, 1952). I am indebted to Professor Stockton for subsequent translated passages from the Vox Clamantis.

11 W. P. Ker considers Gower's Latin verse "generally detestable" (Essays on Medieval Literature, p. 129), though at its best in Bk. I. Macaulay gives it moderate praise (Works, IV, xxxiii), and H. Morley thinks highly of it (English Writers, IV, 199).
Book I was probably added after the other books had been completed. Cf. Stockton, op. cit., p. 8-9, and Works, IV, xxxi-xxxii.

In the subsequent description of the sea and island allegory, Gower depends heavily on Ovid, particularly his Metamorphosis and his Tristia, for descriptive details, but the use to which he puts this material is entirely original with him.


Works, II, xxi-xxiv.

See, for example, CA, VII, 1641-1710.

In this dedication, Gower cannot be accused of betting even on a "dark horse." There was no indication in 1393-34 that Henry would usurp Richard's throne.

As noted by Stockton, op. cit., I, p. 22.


Says John of Salisbury, with a logic worthy of the later Hobbes: "Nature has gathered all the sense of her microcosm . . . into the head. . . . Therefore the prince stands on a pinnacle which is exalted . . . with all the great and high privileges which he deems necessary for himself. . . . The prince is the public power, and a kind of likeness on earth of divine majesty." Ibid., p. 252.


IV (Manchester, 1928), p. 66.

John H. Fisher argues in a recent article "Wyclif, Langland, Gower, and the Pearl Poet on the Subject of Aristocracy," Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Albert Croll Baugh (Univ. of Penn., 1961), pp. 139-57) that Gower was in favor of a
legal machinery to which all the estates of men would have to submit including the king (p. 149). Actually, Gower clearly meant that the only law to which the king should submit is God's law. On other occasions (Cf. Prol., 102-105) he makes it clear that he sees law not as a "democratic" agent but as a means of preserving the distinctions between classes as well as protector of the common good.


26 Owst (op. cit., p. 295) comments, for example, on the subject of the medieval pulpiteers: "Sacred orators of the Church, as hostile to class war, to earthly revenge and social revolution as any Luther, were . . . themselves unconsciously formulating a revolutionary charter of grievances."

27 See Stillwell's discussion of this point, op. cit., p. 456.

28 Owst, op. cit., pp. 291-293.

29 The great exceptions, as we shall see, are the characters of the Lover, the Lady, and the Confessor.

30 VC, II, 629-30.

31 Note especially Gower's detailed discussion of Fortuna, whom he disavows, in VC, II, 51-198.
The growth of an influential upper middle class was one of the more important developments in the history of fourteenth century England, and, as noted earlier, it was to this class that John Gower almost certainly belonged. The intellectual horizons of this group, as well as its material wealth and influence, were steadily expanded. But even granting the widening interests of this new intelligentsia, Gower's own learning should be considered something of a phenomenon. In terms of academic knowledge, the poet was far in advance of his social peers. He himself seems to have been aware of this state of affairs; even in its first redaction, the Confessio Amantis was not designed for the edification of the king alone; the larger purpose of the work, with its combination of "somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore" (Prol. 19), was to fill the need of an increasing audience which desired instructional entertainment—an need which previous English writers had scarcely responded to at all. In other words, Gower was not simply "sugar-coating" information that was already familiar to his readers. He was telling them about things he knew and they did not. In the variety
and scope of the knowledge that he popularized, it is doubtful that even Chaucer surpassed him among English writers. In any case, this popularization of knowledge which Gower passed on for the benefit of his contemporaries should not be thought of as the measure of his own capacities as a scholar. He was, in fact, one of the most learned laymen of his time in England.

The varied subject matter of the *Confessio Amantis* does, however, suggest the wide range of the poet's reading in the ancient and contemporary classics of his day. He was thoroughly familiar with the Vulgate Bible and at least some of the works of Gregory the Great; he knew St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, the encyclopedic *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, the Pantheon of Godfrey of Viterbo, and especially Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*; among the other scientific writers with whom he was familiar were Hildegard of Bingen, Albumasar, and Martianus Capella. Some of the treatises that he studied, such as the *Secreta Secretorum*, were fairly well known, but others, like Albertus Magnus' *Passionibus* and the *Speculum Astronomiae* were rather obscure works that must have been difficult to come by.

Gower probably consulted both Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Trojana* and the *Roman de Troie* of Benoit de Sainte-Maure. He was also familiar, not surprisingly, with the *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, and he was able to cite both Dante and Boccaccio. Among the ancients, Ovid was his favorite,
and he possessed a detailed knowledge of the *Metamorphoses*, the *Heroides*, and *Fasti*. He also referred to Statius, to Livy, and to Servius' commentary on Vergil.

Gower's wide reading, his considerable ability to assimilate what he learned, and his earnest pride in knowing for the sake of knowing have not been enough to prevent some modern readers from viewing his scholarship as dull and unimaginative. Certainly, no one would claim that the poet had the power, so characteristic of Chaucer, of regularly channeling his knowledge into the artful rendering of a characterization or a scene. As we shall see, he could use his learning poetically enough, but usually it was in the interests of poetic narrative rather than in purely descriptive passages. For the present, however, let us consider Gower's abilities primarily in terms of the knowledge which he presents directly, that is, with an emphasis on direct instruction. The modern reader, of course, no longer reads poetry in order to be informed in such matters as astrology, religion, and rhetoric. However, Gower's contemporaries did. Dated as the poet's approach may be, it seems a bit unfair to disparage his work as intrinsically dull for the very same reason that the readers of his own time found it entertaining and edifying. Digression in literature has become a more and more grievous sin, and, not surprisingly, modern critics generally view with impatience the long didactic passages in which
Gower parades his learning. However, some of these instructional detours, when they are considered apart from the overall composition, have a quaint and absorbing appeal that is uniquely their own. More than that, they provide the student of the Middle Ages with a valuable guide to much of the secular learning of the time. The modern specialist in a particular field of the medieval sciences might indeed condemn as superficial the poet's treatment of certain subjects; yet the fact remains that nowhere else in Middle English literature could the modern reader, as well as Gower's contemporaries, find the medieval outlook on a whole curriculum of subjects so ably summarized. This is particularly true of the first long section of the seventh book of the Confessio Amantis, with which the present chapter will be chiefly concerned. Macaulay has remarked that one of the most grievous faults in the structure of the work is that

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deliberate departure from the general plan which we find in the seventh book, where on pretence of affording relief and recreation to the wearied penitent, the Confessor, who says that he has little or no understanding except of love, is allowed to make a digression which embraces the whole field of human knowledge. 1
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In a later chapter the structural function of the seventh book will be discussed in some detail. Here it will suffice to remark that this part of the poem does not stand quite so much in isolation as Macaulay's observation would lead us to believe. The digression
evolves naturally enough from the conversation between the Lover and the Confessor. But even granting, for the moment, that Book VII represents a halt in the narrative movement of the poem, it is still possible, if we consider it in a medieval rather than a modern context, that we, as well as the penitent Lover, may find in this section "relief and recreation" after all.

The first part of the seventh book is primarily concerned with the medieval sciences, that colorful speculation about natural phenomena which so often seems to us to have been compounded half of whimsy, half of witchcraft. For Gower and his age, of course, it was a matter of solemn and lofty study—albeit a study circumscribed by the excessive reliance on authority and by the prevalent religious aversion for the methods of inductive thinking.

To turn from the preceding chapter, with its consideration of Gower's ethical concepts, to a discussion of his view of the natural world does not require an about-face. If Gower could not shed his moralistic point of view even in the treatment of courtly love, as we shall see later, it is not surprising that his descriptions of natural phenomena, in conformity with centuries of patristic and scholastic thought, should be colored by the same moral bias. This very limitation, which compels us to discount Gower, along with most other medieval encyclopedists, from the standpoint of scientific accuracy, nevertheless affords another perspective from which to
consider characteristic patterns of medieval thought. Not surprisingly, however, the study of the medieval sciences, empirical as it was, could be a quagmire even for those who sought to use it, like philosophy, as a handmaiden to theology. Even Gower, who was ordinarily the most orthodox of men, could find himself on treacherous ground occasionally. But for the most part, he had, as Professor George Fox has observed, "a sense of boundary beyond which the human mind should not attempt to go." In the *Mirour de l'Omme*, Gower had remarked:

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Des philosophres ot plusour
Qui dieu conustrent creatour
Par ses foraines creatures,
Son sens, sa beaute, sa valour;
Mais nepouquant le droit savour
Leur faillist, ancois d'autres cures
Demeneront leur envoisures,
Ly uns pour savoir les natures
Des bestes et d'oiseaux entour,
Ly autres firont conjectures
D'astronomye et des figures,
Q'a dieu ne firont plus d'onour.
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(*Mir.* 10669-80.)

In the passage, Gower seems to be censuring the natural philosophers, but as Fox has correctly pointed out, "he is not condemning an interest in nature, but only the preoccupation with nature which interferes with the contemplation of God."³

Gower's reiterated insistence on the limitations of human knowledge was by no means a merely conventional acknowledgement
of a position held by most intellectuals during the Middle Ages.
He knew why he believed as he did; he was intensely aware both
of the side he was on and the alternative to it, the spirit of un-
restricted inquiry. Consequently, he viewed with distrust not only
those few scientists of the time who, like Roger Bacon a century
earlier, had hit upon something like the inductive method of
Renaissance science, but, much more, the pseudo-scientific al-
chemists, sorcerers, and astrologers whose methods, however
impractical, were to set the stage for modern scientific inquiry, and
whose conclusions lured the mind away from that purpose, the
contemplation of God, for which knowledge was designed. The
speculations of these scientists were almost invariably as complex
as they were inaccurate, and the scientists themselves were often
ignorant of the unorthodox implications of their theories. It is
interesting, then, to note the skill and integrity with which Gower
threads his way through the dense variety of their works, rarely
allowing himself to be caught in the snare of heresy, even when he
demonstrates his knowledge of the theory in which a heresy exists.

In commenting on Gower's knowledge of the natural world, I
shall not consider, point by point, all of the several aspects of
secular learning on which the poet touches. Much of this has
already been dealt with in the works of Fox and Wedel. However,
it is to our purpose to consider at least one or two of the scientific
ideas which Gower and his contemporaries found absorbing, and to see how the poet dealt with them.

At the outset, however, a word should be said about the treatment that Gower, in his role as a poet-encyclopedist, has received from those few scholars who have discussed the subject at all. That treatment can be summed up very briefly: Gower has had the bad luck to be compared with scientific writers like the encyclopedist Brunetto Latini on the one hand, and with Chaucer on the other. Thus, Gower is not technical enough: "His actual knowledge was extremely limited and did not involve an intelligent comprehension of the philosophical basis of astrology, or an intimate acquaintance with celestial mechanics." Nor is he imaginative enough in an aesthetic sense: "In turning to Chaucer, it is refreshing to find the didactic and controversial attitude of Gower toward astrology replaced by that of the artist." Now, both of these statements contain some truth. But they are misleading because neither of them deals with Gower in terms of what he was attempting. They fail to reflect the scope of his wide ranging and curious mind, or the degree to which his highly developed ethical sense colored his views, or the difference between the purposes for which he exploited his knowledge and those which motivated Chaucer.

Gower would have been the first to agree that his knowledge of natural science was not that of a specialist. For one thing, he was
interested, not in being a scientist, but in possessing what we would call a "well-rounded" understanding of the various disciplines of which the natural sciences were but one. Another consideration is that he distrusted the ethical consequences of a too great emphasis on this kind of knowledge. A third, and the most important, is that he was writing for the general public—a fact which, despite its obviousness, even Macaulay has ignored. Within this limitation, Gower was as capable and as interesting as any other medieval writer, and far better than any others who wrote in English.

With this preface, let us look first at Gower's treatment of astrology, the most important and the most interesting of the medieval sciences.

The sources which the poet used in his discussion of the subject were, as far as they are known, Albumasar's Introductorium in Astronomiam, Brunetto Latini's Trésor, the pseudo-Aristotelian Secreta Secretorum, the Speculum Astronomiae attributed to Roger Bacon, and an obscure work by one Alchandrus. The greater part of Gower's information derives from the first two of these works. In noting this rather limited bibliography, the reader should bear in mind, not only the general scarcity of learned tomes that were available even to scholarly men at the time, but also the fact that the whole subject of astrology was a fairly recent
innovation in fourteenth-century England. Some allusions to astrology had occurred in various earlier fourteenth-century works, usually in the romances, but not until Gower and Chaucer made use of them did they become an accepted embellishment of English literature. In Gower's case, however, they are not often used as artistic ornamentation. The poet is more interested in presenting his readers with the principles of the science as matter of intrinsic interest rather than as a means of defining a season or presenting a clue to someone's character. But this does not mean that Gower cannot or will not require didactic information to suit the purposes of art. Everyone who has read the Confessio Amantis has noted the "great digression" in the seventh book, which has already been mentioned. However, few critics have given Gower his due regarding his imaginative power on other occasions to shape encyclopedic information to the exigencies of style. Though he rarely uses that power in the interests of characterization or description, he does employ it for the purpose of developing a more powerful and more dramatic narrative. Gower's narrative skill will be discussed in some detail in a later chapter; however, it is worth noting here that that very pedantry which he allows in the garrulous character of the Confessor--and for which he himself is excessively blamed--is vigorously excluded from the stories which the Confessor tells. An example is the tale of Nectanabus in the sixth book. Gower's main
source, the Roman de toute Chevalerie of Thomas of Kent, contained a long passage on astrology "ready-made," so to speak, for our poet's use. It occurs when the astrologer, Nectanabus, in the fashion of the encyclopedist, lectures Queen Olympias on the color of the planets while waiting for a better chance to speak to her of more private matters. Gower, however, deletes this aside for the sake of a greater continuity in his narrative. On the other hand, he introduces additional computations on the part of Nectanabus when these can be used as salient factors in the bringing forth of Olympias' child, Alexander.

Other examples of this type of artful emendation could be cited, even within the one field of astrology--for example, the fine lines to Phebus in the prayer of Cephalus (IV, 3197-3237). However, since we have perhaps digressed too much ourselves, let us return to Gower's own digression on the natural sciences.

In discussing the poet's astrological knowledge, Fox has divided it into four general categories: the planets, the signs, the fifteen stars, and the authors who wrote of astronomy. For our own purposes, it is useful to discuss the last category first. As Fox points out, Gower's summary of astrological terms and theories ends with a reference list of authors on the science. A quick glance at this list is in order:

On of the ferste which it wrot
After Noe, it was Nembrot,  
To his disciple Ychonithon  
And made a bok forth therupon  
The which Megaster cleped was.  
An other Auctor in this cas  
Is Arachel, the which men note;  
His bok is Abbategnyh hote.  
Danz Tholome is noght the lest,  
Which makth the bok of Almageste;  
And Alfraganus doth the same,  
Whos bok is Chatemuz be name.  
Gebuz and Alpetragus eke  
Of Planisperie, which men seke,  
The bokes made: and over this  
Ful many a worthi clercl ther is,  
That written upon this clergie  
The bokes of Altemetrie,  
Planemetrie and ek also,  
Whiche as belongen bothe tuo,  
So as thei ben naturiens.  
Unto these Astronomiens.  
Men sein that Habraham was on;  
Bot whether that he wrot or non,  
That finde I noght; and Moises  
Ek was an other: bot Hermes  
Above alle othre in this science  
He hadde a gret experience.  

(CA, VII, 1451-1478.)

This is hardly Gower at his best, but the passage has a connection  
with a particular point which Professor Fox wishes to make,  
namely, that Gower was no specialist in the medieval sciences.  

That fact is not an arguable matter. But Fox goes on to say:

I do not believe that Gower was acquainted with  
the authors whom he lists, for a very simple  
reason. These are authors of difficult works on  
astronomy. Only a man with a keen interest in  
astronomy could wade through them. Anyone  
possessing such an interest would never have  
turned out as puerile a performance as the  
astrological portion of the education of Alexander.  
The works of some, or all, of these writers may
have passed through Gower's hands, but that he
had mastered them, and knew in what respect
their theories differed is to me incredible. 13

One wonders whether this kind of statement is very justifiable.
For one thing, it implies that Gower was something of a poseur,
pretending to a knowledge of books he hadn't read when in fact such
lists were an approved part of medieval rhetorical theory. For
another, it suggests that his knowledge of astrology, rather than
being merely limited, was "puerile," that is, foolish and childish.
And for still another, the criticism, delivered in a vacuum, leaves
one with a more-than-ever reinforced impression of Gower not only
as a stuffy pedant, but as a false pedant at that. Indebted as any
student of Gower must be to Professor Fox for the data he provides,
such statements as the one just quoted have convinced this student,
at least, that Gower's poem can only receive a just evaluation if it
is considered with the author's overall purpose, and his audience,
always in mind.

In this connection, let us look again at Gower's guide to the
astrological authorities. Even the most casual reader will see at
once that the poet is not claiming an intimate knowledge of these
authors. 14 Gower has simply provided a guide for "whom it liketh
for to wite/ Of hem that this science write." Far from claiming any
great authority on the subject, the poet, with characteristic modesty,
directs his readers to those who really are authorities. 15
As for the puerility of Gower's treatment of astrology, the important point is this: granting that Gower was not writing a book on astrology, but rather a summary suitable for educated non-specialists in the field, his generalizations are not often wrong, or even misleading, according to the knowledge of his time. His is popular science, but unlike so much else of the type, it is not particularly out of date. Gower's presentation is the more notable when one considers that England, unlike the Continent, had not produced hardly anything in the way of astrological writings except with regard to the theological implications of the science—to which, as we shall see, Gower also added his share.

Gower's treatment of the planets, their movements and influences, is, as Professor Fox admits, respectable enough. For example, the reason why some planets overtake and pass others in their course is that

The more thei stonden lowe,
The more ben the cercles lasse.

(CA, VII, 706-7.)

In describing the order of the planets, Gower employs correctly the Ptolemaic system. The moon has "governance" over the sea, the tides, and "every fissh which hath a schelle." Its eclipse is correctly explained:

... the Sonne out of his stage
Ne seth him noght with full visage,
For he is with the ground beschaded,  
So that the Mone is somdiel faded  
And may noght fully schyne cler.  

(CA, VII, 741-5.)

Germans and Englishmen are particularly influenced by the moon's "disposicion" which prompts them to "travaile in every lond."

In like manner, Gower moves through the roster of the planets, dutifully ascribing to each, in brief outline, its position and influence. Thus, Mercury influences men to be bookish, sedentary, mercenary, and its effect is felt mostly in Burgundy and France. Venus, naturally, rules all lovers, and, in matters of passion, causes them to lose their reason. The special domain of this planet is Lombardy.

In presenting this encyclopedic information, Gower moves in and out of poetry, but, all things considered, the overall effect is decidedly pleasant. Time and again one comes upon passages that are bright and clear as the heavenly bodies they describe; the academic dryness of the subject is often completely overshadowed by the lyric freshness of the lines. Consider, for example, the poet's own canticle to the sun, which, for all its conventionality, still has a spontaneous quality that can "gladeth" the heart quite as much as the thing it describes:

The brighte Sonne stant above,  
Which is the hindrere of the nyht  
And forthrere of the daies lyht,  
As he which is the worldes ye,
Thurgh whom the lusti compaignie
Of foules be the morwe singe,
The freisshe flourēs sprede and springe,
The hīhe tre the ground beschadeth,
And every mannes herte gladeth.

Of gold glistrende Spoke and whiel
The Sonne his carte hath faire and wiel,
In which he sitt, and is coroned
With brighte stones environed.

(CA, VII, 802-10, 815-18.)

Fox has tentatively ascribed most of Gower's information
about the planets to Brunetto Latini's Trésor—a well chosen source,
as it happens; the great scholar and mentor to Dante was one of the
most famous encyclopedists of his day. Nevertheless, Gower did
not depend on his authority blindly. A number of details in this
section, including the long and fanciful description of the Sun's
crown, which follows the passage quoted above, were found by
Gower elsewhere. 18

Gower's account of the fifteen stars (VII, 1281-1438), the
point of which is "apparently no more than that certain herbs and
stones possess the powers of certain celestial bodies, and there­
fore one could work wonders with them if one knew how,"19 is quite
as dull as Fox suggests.

The poet's description of the signs of the zodiac (VII, 878-1236)
includes precisely those textbook elements that one would expect in
view of the limitations of Gower's own knowledge and even more, the
unspecialized interest of his audience. He describes each sign in
terms of its configuration, the number of its stars and their position, its "quality" or particular combination of elements, hot and dry, dry and cold, et cetera, and its month. To these data, Gower sometimes makes the fortunate addition of a few lines describing the month to which certain signs belong. The poet's enumeration of the stars in each sign and his arrangement of them does not conform to the usual Ptolemaic analysis of the zodiac. Because of this, Macaulay had assumed that Gower was confused about the matter. Fox, however, has produced evidence that the poet's description is a correct summary of a more obscure planetary system propounded by an equally obscure astrologer named Alchandrus. This writer was apparently an unreliable, if ingenious, source. In reproducing his arrangement of the stars, or perhaps a redaction of his arrangement, Gower was guilty of passing along unsound astrological lore, but this is the only occasion when that is the case. A more serious consideration, however, is the fact that Gower seems here to be dealing with the forbidden art of astrological magic; his and Alchandrus' disposition of the stars is dependent upon an unconventional way of dealing with the zodiac. That is, instead of considering it in terms of the twelve signs that are the mansions of the sun, it is considered in terms of the twenty-eight "partial signs" that are the mansions of the moon. There is
no point in particularizing this matter further here, except to add that these mansions of the moon were not in good standing with respectable astrologers of the time. It is impossible to conjecture why Gower used this source at this particular point in his discussion, rather than one that would have dealt with the zodiac of signs more conventionally. The important consideration is this--that, having used it, Gower divests what he uses of the magical implications that had tainted the original. Fox believes that this was the accidental result of the poet's ignorance. He suggests that Gower probably did not know that he was writing about the mansions of the moon, since he did not use the phrase or call the mansions by their Arabic names. Yet he must have known that he was not dealing with the mansions of the sun, the twelve conventional signs which were the one fact of astrology that everyone then knew about and which many people still do. It is more reasonable to conclude that Gower was deliberately escaping the consequences of that knowledge, namely, that the mansions of the moon were used for the purposes of magic, and particularly for the prediction of events in the lives of men. Gower side-steps all of this; what he reproduces is merely an unconventional placement of the stars in the zodiacal signs.

This departure from accepted theories brings us to a consideration of Gower's attitude towards astrology, as opposed to his mere reiteration of some of its principles. In this connection,
a few words should be said about the orthodox view of the science, as Gower inherited it. Without attempting to review the long history of the Church's changing attitude towards it, we can turn to Thomas Aquinas, in whose writings the relationship of astrology to theology was definitively stated as far as the later medieval centuries were concerned. The modern reader, to whom the whole subject of astrology suggests an element of magic, may not find it as easy as the medieval scholar did to distinguish between the scientific and the magical side of the subject. Aquinas, however, is precise in separating these two aspects. Astrology, then, is a legitimate field of study as long as it remains a part of the natural sciences, that is, the world of tangible phenomena and their interrelationships. The physical universe--trees, crops, tides, seasons--as well as the physical or bodily nature of man, may legitimately be said to be ruled by the stars:

Every multitude proceeds from unity, and what is immovable is always uniform, whereas what is moved has many ways of being. For this reason, it must be observed that throughout the whole of nature, all movement proceeds from the immovable. Therefore the more immovable certain things are, the more are they the cause of those things which are more movable. Now the heavenly bodies are of all bodies the most immovable, for they are not moved save locally. Hence, the movements of bodies here below, which are various and multiform movements, must be referred to the movements of the heavenly bodies as to their cause.
Consequently, astrologers may well be able to foretell the influence that the heavenly bodies will have on matters of medicine, agriculture, meteorology, and the like; and these predictions are valuable because they aid man in anticipating events in the scheme of nature.

On the more controversial subject of the relationship between astrology and free will, Aquinas crystallizes a compromise attitude that had been evolving for a long time. He states that, since the human intellect and will are not corporeal, they are not directly influenced by the stars. However, since the corporeal organs are affected by the heavenly bodies and since will and intellect are, in turn, affected by these organs, the stars may be said to have an indirect influence on them. The intellect is more susceptible than the all-important will, but even when the intellect fails, grace may rescue the latter faculty from the necessity of yielding to the influence of the stars. In this sense of resisting the power of the heavenly bodies, the wise man may be said to rule the stars, since he rules his own passions.

Despite his pliability on the subject, Aquinas does draw the line at the prediction, by means of astrology, of fortuitous events. Particularly, the prophesying with certainty of man's future is an evil art, since it denies the all-important element of free will.

During the one and a half centuries that separated Aquinas
and the English poet, the former's views were repeated many times with little variation. In England, perhaps the best such restatement prior to Gower's occurs in a late thirteenth-century fragment, part of a *Legend of Michael*:

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Thurf greit wit of clergie here / the planets / names were furst ifounde.
For ech of the sovene mai greit vertu an urthe do,
Bothe of weder and frut, as here poer is thereto;
And also men that boeth ibore under here m^e^ste iwis
Schulle habbe diverse m^e^ste, and lyf, after that
here vertu is,
Summe lechours, and summe glotouns, and summe other mannere;
N atheles a man of god inwit of alle thulke him mai skere:
For planetes ne doth non other bote 3eveth in manes wille,
To beo lither other god as here vertu wolde to tille,
And 3eveth also qualite to do so other so,
And no^t for then by his inwit ech man may do.
For such qualite^hath noman to beo lechour other schrewe,
That ne mai him witie ther a^en, ac natheles so doth fewe. 25
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There can be no doubt that Gower understood this view; if anything, he carried it further. He may have been no specialist in the science itself, but he had a clear understanding of astrology in terms of its ethical and theological consequences. Before ever beginning his summary of its principles, the poet puts the reader on his guard; after stating the astrologers' belief in the power of the heavenly bodies, Gower goes on to say that

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... the divin seith otherwise,
That if men weren goode and wise
And plesant unto the godhede,
Thei sholden noght the sterres drede;
For o man, if him wel befalle,
Is more worth than ben thei alle
Towards him that weldeth al.
Bot yet the lawe original,
Which he hath set in the natures,
Mot worchen in the creatures,
That thereof mai be non obstacle,
Bot if it stonde upon miracle
Thurgh preiere of som holy man.

(CA, VII, 65-163.)

In other words, the laws of nature, including those that the science of astrology purports to study, are necessary to the order of the universe. But they are by no means the justification of a doctrine of predestination or of a stoic fatalism. The court of last appeal is always God Himself, who made the laws of nature as well as the men who are influenced by them. Man's own free will on the one hand and the always present possibility of the miraculous on the other compel the science to take its place in the larger domain of theology.

Concerning fee will, and its relation to the stars, Gower had earlier stated his attitude in the Mirour de l'Ommme:

. . . Et nepourqant
Un soul prodhomme a dieu priant
Porra quasser du maintenant
Trestout le pris de leur diete:
Dont m'est avis a mon semblant,
Depuisque l'omme est si puissant,
Nous n'avons garde du planete.

(Mir., 26742-48.)
And also, in the *Vox Clamantis*:

In virtute dei sapiens dominabitur astra,
Totaque consequitur vis orizontis eum:
Circulus et ciclus, omnis quoque spera suprema
Sub pede sunt hominis quem iuuat ipse deus.

(*VC*, II, 239-42.)

This last quotation and its less explicit reiteration in the *Confessio Amantis* represent the end result of the long battle between medieval theology and the science of astrology. The Ptolemaic precept that the wise man rules the stars has undergone a complete transformation. Originally the phrase had referred to the astrologer, who by means of his science could outguess and avert his destiny. With Thomas Aquinas, the "wise man" has become the man of strong character, who, by understanding the planetary influences and their effects on his "natural" nature, may guard against the evil inclinations they might produce in him. Gower, however, gives the phrase an even more religious meaning. Prayer and the efficacy of grace as well as strength of character, are the means by which the wise man controls the stars.

Only once where the subject of astrology is concerned does Gower step out of character as the champion of orthodoxy. In the sixth book of the *Confessio Amantis* the Confessor warns the Lover against using sorcery as a means of furthering his suit, but then he interjects an interesting qualification:

For these craftes, as I finde,
A man mai do be weie of kinde,
Be so it be to good entente.
(CA, VI, 1303-5.)

The Church, of course, was against any kind of magic, white as well as black. But these lines are less heretical than they may at first appear to be, and not, as Wedel believes, simply the result of Gower's too close adherence to his source, the Speculum Astronomiae.26 The phrase "be weie of kinde" explains Gower's meaning. As previously noted, he uses it frequently, and it has the clear connotation of "according to the laws of nature." In this context, then, we may conclude that the kind of magic that Gower's Confessor is advocating is scarcely magic at all, since the whole point of that activity is that, whether for good or ill purposes, it always involves a violation of the natural law. Gower, with his conservative and religious habit of thought, must have felt that all scientific inquiry, even when it was respectable, was "magic" of a sort—but white magic, as long as it was employed "be weie of kinde."

As far as other scientific and pseudo-scientific subjects are concerned, Gower is almost as content to reproduce inert facts as Professor Fox insists that he is. His geometry is rudimentary, and so is his knowledge of geography and medicine. These are trifles thrown in to amuse an audience that knew even less about such matters than the poet himself did. In his discussion of the microcosm and
the macrocosm, however, Gower was clearly on familiar ground, and he demonstrates a more than amateur knowledge of these related subjects, which, with astrology, were perhaps the most important fields of scientific speculation in the later Middle Ages. Gower gives them a corresponding degree of attention in the Confessio Amantis. The Prologue (910-66) and the seventh book (203-620) contain his most important, though not his only, statements on these subjects. His emphasis however, should not, be thought of only as an indication that he was catering to a popular interest. Nor in this case is it possible to agree with Fox's assertion that Gower was an incorrigible amateur in everything that had to do with natural science. It is true, on the other hand, that the poet's intelligent grasp of the underlying principles of the microcosm-macrocosm relationship were not particularly motivated by the spirit of scientific inquiry. He was above all else interested in substantiating a specific point of view about the human condition, and science was one available means of his doing so. This point of view might be summed up in the following statements: (a) the universe exists for the instruction of man, and (b) the natural world is influenced by the actions of man, and to an extent reflects those actions. Those ideas, particularly the former, were by no means original with Gower; they were, in fact, decidedly representative of the thought of the time. But the latter point, in spite of its close relationship with
the spirit of medieval Christianity, was rarely made explicit; and
certainly no literary figure of the age carried the idea further than
did Gower. It is probable that in this connection Gower was far
more influenced by non-literary sources than by the works he had
read. In any case, he saw fit to push this belief in the ultimate
responsibility of man for his own actions to an imaginative, if not
a logical, conclusion. As we have seen, Gower believed that the
welfare of the social order was inextricably related to the degree
of virtue or vice that existed in the lives of individual men. But
more, he was convinced that the natural world itself was dependent
on human actions for its condition:

Bot al this wo is cause of man,
The which that wit and reson can,
And that in tokne and in witnesse
That ilke ymage bar liknesse
Of man and of non other beste.
For ferst unto the mannes heste
Was every creature ordeined,
Bot afterward it was restréigned:
Whan that he fell, thei fellen eke,
Whan he was sek, thei woxen seke;
For as the man hat passioun
Of seknesse, in comparisoun
So soffren othre creatures.
Lo, ferst the hevenly figures,
The Sonne and Mone eclipsen bothe,
And ben with mannes senne wrothe;
The purest Eir for Senne alofte
Hath been and is corrupt fulofoe,
Right now the hyhe wyndes blowe,
And anon after thei ben lowe,
Now clowdy and now clier it is;
So may it proeven wel be this,
A mannes Senne is forto hate,
Which makth the welkne to debate.
And forto se the proprete
Of every thyng in his degree,
Benethe forth among ous hiere
Al stant aliche in this matiere:
The See now ebbeth, now it floweth,
The lond now welketh, now it groweth,
Now be the Trees and leves grene,
Now thei be bare and nothing sene,
Now be the lusti somer floures,
Now be the stormy wynter shoures,
Now be the daies, now the nyhtes,
So stant ther nothing al upryhtes,
Now it is lyht, now it is derk;
And thus stant al the worldes werk
After the disposicioun
Of man and his condicioun.

( CA, Prol., 905-44.)

Nowhere in Middle English literature is this ethical connection between man and nature so emphatically and precisely stated as in the passage quoted above. It is not surprising, then, that Gower should have seized on the currently available ideas concerning the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm to prove his point. This subject is treated in considerable detail in the seventh book of the Confessio Amantis (203-520) and time and again the poet demonstrates that he has a sound understanding of the material he discusses. He is indebted to the Trésor of Brunetto Latini for much of his information. Clearly, he does not intend to reproduce all that the Italian encyclopedist had had to say, but his treatment of various aspects of the universe, notably the elements, earth, air, water, and fire,
are, with the exception of the last, precise and informative. Nor does Gower depend entirely on Latini. In the case of the element, air, Gower introduces a refinement not found in the Tresor—the concept that the sphere of air

\[
\ldots \text{in Periferies thre} \\
\text{Divided is of such degre,} \\
\text{Benethe is on and on amiddde,} \\
\text{To whiche above is set the thridde.} \\
\text{(CA, VII, 265-68.)}
\]

These three sub-division, or "periferies," each have their own attributes, and are responsible for various natural phenomena—for example, the first "periferie" is dense and misty, and accounts for dew and frost on earth. From the second

\[
\ldots \text{as bokes sein,} \\
\text{The moiste dropes of the reyn} \\
\text{Descenden into Middilerthe,} \\
\text{And tempreth it to sed and Erthe,} \\
\text{And doth to springe grass and flour.} \\
\text{And ofte also the grete schour} \\
\text{Out of such place it mai be take,} \\
\text{That it the forme schal forsake} \\
\text{Of reyn, and into snow be torned;} \\
\text{And ek it mai be so sojorned} \\
\text{In sondri places up alofte,} \\
\text{That into hail it torneth ofte.} \\
\text{(CA, VII, 285-97.)}
\]

And the third accounts for thunder and lightning.

This description of the four elements is a prelude to Gower's discussion of the four complexions of man. (VI, 393-489). The poet gives a competent summary of the nature of the Melancholic Phlegmatic, Sanguine, and Choleric man, his
qualities, and his characteristics. The Choleric man, for example, is of the nature of fire, that is, with dry and hot qualities, and is prone to be "enginous," "irous," and an ambitious but unsuccessful lover. This information, interesting as it was to Gower's cultivated audience, and still is to the student who seeks an introduction to the medieval sciences, is most worth considering in the light of the poet's concept of the natural universe. He knows that

\begin{quote}
Al ethli thing which god began
Was only mad to serve man.
\end{quote}

(CA, VII, 511-12.)

But man, not only through his original sin but because of his continuing sinfulness, is doomed to see in nature the reflection of his own corruption. And since nature, as we have seen, must influence as well as reflect human behavior, a cruel cycle has been set in motion, from which man may rescue himself only by means of free will and grace. The qualities, cold, hot, moist, and dry, which in the universe prevent even the elements from being found in a pure state, reflect, as well as physiologically explain, the discord in man's nature:

\begin{quote}
He which natureth every kinde,
The myhti god, so as I finde,
Of man, which is his creature,
Hath so devided the nature,
That non til other wel acordeth:
And be the cause it so discordeth,
The lif which fieleth the seknesse
Mai stonde upon no sekernesse.
\end{quote}

(CA, VII, 393-400.)
This idea, embedded in Gower's discussion of the natural world, is an echo of his more general statement in the Prologue:

It may first proeve upon a man;
The which, for his complexioun
Is mad upon division
Of cold, of hot, of moist, of drye,
He mot be verray kynde dye;
For the contraire of his astat
Stant evermore in such debat,
Til that o part be overcome,
Ther may no final pes be nome.
Bot other wise, if a man were
Mad al togedre of o materie
Withouten interrupcioun,
Ther scholde no corrupcioun
Engendre upon that unite:
Bot for ther is diversite
Withinne himself, he may noght laste,
That he ne deith ate laste.

(CA, Prol., 974-90.)

Gower has brought us back, by means of science, to the idea with which he had begun the Confessio Amantis:

The man, as telleth the clergie,
Is as a world in his partie,
And when this li tel world mistorneth,
The grete world al overtorneth.
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
The man is cause of alle wo,
Why this world is divided so.

(CA, Prol., 955-58, 965-66.)

Gower was clearly indebted to his sources for the scientific facts which he compiled. No one would seriously deny Fox's assertion that he lacked the faculty of scientific speculation. But it is not true that the poet "is satisfied with facts which do not appear to the modern mind particularly illuminating, nor do they seem to have
shed in Gower's mind the clear bright light of knowledge which is power. 35 Perhaps it depends on what one means by power, but Gower's unique application of the medieval scientific theory of elements--their division and impurity--to an ethical consideration of the nature of man would surely indicate that he was capable of something more than a complacent acceptance of facts.

Before leaving the subject of Gower's treatment of the medieval sciences, we might halt briefly in a kind of border zone, the transitional region between the natural world and the mythological one, which is inhabited by Gower's bestiary. The poet does not present us with a catalogue of zoological specimens in the manner of most medieval encyclopedists, but his stories abound with animals--the tiger, the peacock, the elephant, the oyster, the chameleon. These creatures, not surprisingly, are used to illustrate moral lessons. Granting this didactic purpose, Gower deals with them beguilingly enough. One or two examples will suffice as representative of his treatment of them.

In the third book of the Confessio Amantis, the Confessor is holding forth against homicide. He comments, rather bitingly, that

Men schal nogh find upon his liche
A beste forto take his preie;
And sithen kinde hath such a weie,
Thanne is it wonder of a man,
Which kynde hath and resoun can,
That he wol owther more or lasse
His kinde and resoun overpasse,
And sle that is to him semblable.

(CA, III, 2588-95.)

Here, as so often in Gower, one finds sins represented in the early patristic sense, that is, as the unnatural thing, a crime against nature. The dichotomy which had become more and more articulate in the Middle Ages between sense and spirit, body and soul, seems to have disturbed Gower not at all. The result, in this most moral of men, is a remarkable tolerance where natural inclinations are concerned. This tolerance is most noticeable where we would most expect it to be—in Gower's references to matters of sex; as to that, we will have more to say in the following chapter. Right now, let us look at the particular zoological specimen that Gower produces which, by its example,

\[
\ldots \text{mai well suie} \\
\text{That man schal homicide esdhuie.}
\]

(CA, III, 2617-18.)

This is a bird which the Confessor does not name, but which the reader may be tempted to. It has the face of a man, and a tender conscience. However, it is also a very formidable carnivore, and when a man crosses its path it does not hesitate to kill and devour him. But later

Whan he hath eten al his felle,
And that schal be beside a welle,
In which whan he wol drinke take,
Of his visage and seth the make
That he hath slain, anon he thenketh
Of his misdede, and it forthenketh
So gretly, that for pure sorwe
He liveth noht til on the morwe.

(CA, III, 2609-16.)

Gower's audience, as well as the modern reader, might have felt that the repentant bird would have served as a better example of gullibility than of remorse, but, either way, it has a certain charm of a kind not infrequent in the pages of the Confessio Amantis.

Another small instance will serve to indicate the imaginative uses to which Gower could put his "zoology" when it was necessary.

In the story of Dido and Eneas in the fourth book (77-146) Gower has Dido compare herself to a swan, in a letter to her departed lover.

She warns Eneas that if he fails to return to her

Sche scholde stonde in such degre
As whilom stod a swan tofore,
Of that sche hadde hire make lore;
For sorwe a fethere into hire brain
She schof and hath hirselfe slain.

(CA, IV, 104-109.)

Florence McCulloch, in a brief commentary, discusses the origin of the "suicidal" feather idea. Her most important point is that the lines in Ovid's Fasti,

flebilibus numerio veluti canentia dura
traiectus penna tempora cantal olor

which Miss McCulloch renders as

Such notes as the swan chants in mournful numbers,
When the cruel shaft has pierced his snowy brow,
were misunderstood in later renditions of the story. Ovid's *penna* was interpreted as "feather" rather than "arrow". Brunetto Latini, in the *Trésor*, says that "when death is imminent, one of the feathers of the swan's head is implanted in its brain, whereupon the bird begins its sweet song."\(^{40}\)

Miss McCulloch does not speculate as to whether Gower's own use of the swan figure was borrowed directly from Ovid or from Latini; he was familiar with the works of both authors. In all probability it was the latter. But for our purposes the important thing to note is Gower's use of the idea. Granting that a feather was not what Ovid had had in mind, Gower makes an imaginative use of it in this quite different context. His choice of the swan, because of the lyric mood with which its death is associated, and his description of the feather as the instrument of suicide are poetic conceptions of a high order, and quite in keeping with Dido's unhappy state.

Notwithstanding the suicidal birds referred to above, most of Gower's discussions of natural history are, as I have indicated, in encyclopedic form. Since there will be little opportunity to refer to them in later chapters, the present consideration of Gower as a man of learning has been devoted primarily to that aspect of his scholarship. In later chapters we will have an opportunity to note his considerable knowledge in other fields, notably those of classical mythology, Biblical literature, and the literature of courtly love.\(^{41}\)
Here, a brief summary will suffice: Macaulay, in his treatment of Gower's life, had remarked on the poet's familiarity with the Bible. Fifteen of the stories and important exempla which the Confessor relates in the *Confessio Amantis* have the Bible as their source. Besides these, there are a great many isolated references to Biblical personages and events throughout all three of the poet's major works. Gower knew the book, it would seem, as well as any cleric, and he could draw upon it, chapter and verse, with the assurance of one who had read it often. He knew how to use its contents effectively and not always with perfect reverence. (Granting their Old Testament sensuality, we are still not prepared to find Solomon and David among the aged lovers in the court of Venus, along with such pagan worthies as Ovid and Plato (*CA*, VIII, 2689-2719). Hardly ever does he become confused in his references to its stories, nor does he ever misappropriate a biblical name.

It is less easy to determine Gower's knowledge of theology and the writings of the Church Fathers; some of those with whom he was familiar have been noted in the first pages of this chapter. However, in the *Confessio Amantis* particularly, there is little opportunity for the poet to reflect the degree of his knowledge of these patristic writers. In any case, his thought was imbued with the orthodox doctrines of the Church, and he seems to have understood the implications of those doctrines clearly. We have already noted that his
belief in free will, in the subordination of science to theology, in a microcosmic-macrocosmic world divinely planned, in the mutability of the universe, were all in keeping with the accepted theology of the time. Whether he understood many of the finer points of scholastic speculation is doubtful; at any rate, there was little chance to include such material in his poetry.

In the Confessio Amantis, Gower's greatest source of narrative material is drawn from the matter of classical mythology. As with the Bible, he has assimilated this material thoroughly and knows how to use it imaginatively, as we shall see in a later discussion of the poet's narrative technique. In her onomasticon of Gower's mythological names, one graduate student has taken the trouble of compiling the more than three hundred classical names that occur in the Confessio Amantis. More to the point, however, the vast majority of the tales themselves are drawn from classical mythology. Gower's main sources were the works of Ovid, the Troy-Book of Benoit de St. Maure, and Le roman de Marques de Rome.

One other all-important field of Gower's knowledge, which may perhaps beg a distinction between the terms "learning" and "scholarship," is that of courtly love. Because of its obvious importance to a work entitled the "Lover's Confession," it will be dealt with in a separate chapter.
The isolated aspects of Gower's learning, with which the previous pages have been concerned, are not meant to illustrate the scope or even the depth of learning of which the poet was capable. It is to be hoped, on the other hand, that they may suggest to the reader the fact that Gower was not, even as an encyclopedist, merely a dealer in inert facts. Granting the pioneering character of his work—didacticism and entertainment had never been so thoroughly mixed before—and granting also that Gower's interest in the natural world was not that of a specialist, his accomplishment is a considerable one. The first part of his seventh book may still be read, even with pleasure, as a primer in various academic disciplines of the later Middle Ages.
CHAPTER III

FOOTNOTES

1 Works, III, xix.


3 Fox, loc. cit.


5 Fox, op. cit., p. 94.

6 Wedel, op. cit., p. 142.


8 The Arcandam doctor peritssimus ac non vulgares Astrologus de veritatibus et praelectionibus Astrologia. This last source was proposed by Fox (op. cit., p. 68).

9 Robert Grosseteste and his pupil, Roger Bacon, were the most notable pioneers of the science in England. They had few successors among their countrymen.

10 Wedel, op. cit., p. 132.

11 Fox, op. cit., p. 84.

12 p. 62.

13 Fox, p. 83.
Other astrologers, notably Albumazar, who did influence Gower to a considerable degree, are mentioned in more specific contexts, e.g., VII, 1239.

Macaulay suggests that he may have borrowed part of his list from the Speculum Astronomiae. Works, III, 527. Note.

The exception is the above-noted Speculum Astronomiae.

Fox, p. 62.

Cf. Fox, p. 64.

Fox, p. 81.

Works, III, 525, note.


Fox, p. 78.

Summa Theologica, 1.115. 3; Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, ed. Anton C. Pegis, I (New York, 1945) 1061.

Summa, 1.115. 4; Ibid., 1063.

Cited from Wedel, op. cit., p. 114; Wedel makes the rather confusing statement that only in the closing line does the author indicate a familiarity with the view expounded by Aquinas. Actually, all the lines agree with Aquinas' views on the subject.

Wedel, p. 142.

Fox, pp. 19-50.

Fox (p. 23) cites Hildegard of Bingen's De Natura Rerum as the work most in accord with Gower's theories, but there is no evidence to indicate that the poet knew of this book.

Cf. above, p. 33.

Fox, p. 37.
Gower sees the four elements as four spheres, enclosed one within another, like Chinese boxes. A fifth sphere, Orbis, encloses the whole, like a shell. (CA, VII, 601-20.)

Most of Gower's information on this subject was derived either from Brunetto or the French version of the Secreta Secretorum of Jofroi de Watreford. Cf. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 342.

Fox points out (p. 36) that Gower gives little attention to the important subject of "humors" in discussing the complexion theory.

The element, water, for instance, is moist and cold.

Fox, p. 49.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that this same erroneous notion was to become, under different auspices, a basic tenet of many eighteenth and nineteenth century romantics.

Gower also uses this bird in the Mirour (5029-5040). In both instances he attributes his information to Solinus, but Macaulay found no references to it in Solinus' work (Works, II, p. 500, note.) I have not been able to discover it in the Tresor, nor in T. H. White's Bestiary.


McCulloch, p. 290.


Gower touches on many other subjects, from contemporary politics to the evils of paganism, but his knowledge in these matters is generally superficial. He even discusses rhetoric briefly (VII, 1507-1640) and has the distinction of being the first to do so in the English language.

Works, IV, xxx.

GOWER AND THE SUBJECT OF LOVE

Courtly love, with its special characteristics of secreteness, adultery, humility, and the religion of love, has been discussed often in detail,\(^1\) and summarized still more frequently in works relating to the subject; there is no need in the present case to echo all of the rules of the game yet again. However, it is to the point to introduce a discussion of Gower's treatment of courtly love with a brief mention of some of the variations to which its principles were subjected almost from the moment they came into being. Strictly speaking, perhaps only Chretien de Troyes (in Lancelot) and Guillaume de Lorris approximated in their work the elaborate conventions which Andreas Capellanus had codified. The ritual which the love service required was a cage which soon became too small for the emotional and psychological reactions which it had itself helped to promote. The variations on the theme soon ranged from the perfunctory woman-worship of the typical prose romances to the love-death climax of Thomas of Britain and Gottfried's Tristan. Yet despite their diversity, there remained a core of shared characteristics: all of the romances were marked by an atmosphere of
unreality, which removed the protagonists of them not only from the world of everyday reality, but from the dictates of Christian morality as well. Of course, the writers of this type of literature were conscious of the incompatibility of the courtly love doctrine with the precepts of Christianity. The palinode with which Andreas ends his De Amore, the disclaimer of originality with which Chretien begins the Lancelot, the irresistible nature of the love potion from which Tristan and Iseult drink—all these are representative attempts to circumvent the consequences of the courtly love doctrine without giving up the doctrine itself.

These tactics of the continental writers, however, were at best rather passive evasions of responsibility when compared to the terms on which English writers of the fourteenth century coped with this system, that, inevitably but almost reluctantly, they had inherited. Excluding various dream visions, such as the Book of the Duchess, and various short poems and stories, there remain three important and lengthy works—two of them masterpieces—which were written contemporaneously with the Confessio Amantis and which exemplify the English adaptation of the rules of courtly love, namely Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, and Thomas Usk's Testament of Love. A brief glance at the way in which the authors of these works "coped" with the courtly love doctrine is in order here.
Chaucer's *Troilus* is probably the finest courtly love poem ever written. And yet it is not too much to say that at least part of the reason for its excellence is due to its author's ability to thoroughly transcend the "game" which Andreas had long before devised. The process is complicated, but in outline it consists of a two-fold transformation: first, Chaucer applies the rules of the doctrine to the essentially non-courtly tale of Boccaccio, and then, or rather, at the same time, he so humanizes those rules that the ritual aspect of the doctrine is hardly felt by the reader. The prescribed steps in the ritual are all but submerged in the description of intensely experienced, but believable, emotion. And, of course, the poet's skill with characterization removes the figures of the lady and the lover, particularly the former, from the usual stereotyped representations found in romance literature. This element of humanization, even more than Troilus' great vision at the end of the poem, was the means by which Chaucer reconciled the heretical code with the dictates of his conscience: the rules have become a part of human nature and have ceased to be exploited for their own sake.

In turning to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we find, ironically enough, that this most perfect of Arthurian romances in English has, as one of its major themes, the rejection of the doctrine of courtly love. The poem is a wonderful study in the potency of
certain ideas, even when the ideas themselves are under attack:
nothing could be more "courtly" than the circumstances under which
Gawain refuses the advances of the courtly lady. Considered closely,
ev...
Like a confused Dante, Usk tries to persuade us that Margarite, while retaining her earthly allure, is nevertheless a symbol of divine grace. It may not be a very convincing argument, but certainly, in his attempt to combine allegorically the different impulses of flesh and spirit, Usk has wandered far afield from the pattern Andreas Capellanus had set down, even though, throughout the Testament of Love, the latter's rules are followed.

Chaucer, Usk, and the author of Sir Gawain were, unlike their poetic predecessors in England, quite conscious of the implications of the courtly love doctrine. They understood its conventions, were at home with its refinements, and yet each chose, in his own way, to circumvent the consequences toward which continental writers had so often been led: the elevation of earthly passion to a plane beyond the reach of either Christian morality or political loyalty. In Sir Gawain the courtly lady, far from being aloof, seems almost predatory; in Troilus she has become a quite human, and by no means perfect, woman; and in the Testament she has been metamorphosed into a confused but unmistakable abstraction of Divine Love.

How then, does Gower present his courtly lady? And how does he handle the whole subject of romantic love, the avowed theme of his Confessio Amantis?
The first question is easily answered. The poet does not present the lady at all, that is, not directly. But as Macaulay says, she is "constantly in the background of the dialogue." According to him,

We recognize in her a creature of flesh and blood, no goddess indeed, as her lover himself observes, but a charming embodiment of womanly grace and refinement. She is surrounded by lovers, but she is wise and wary. She is courteous and gentle, but at the same time firm: she will not gladly swear, and therefore says nay without an oath, but it is a decisive nay to any who are disposed to presume. She does not neglect her household duties merely because a lover insists upon hanging about her, but leaves him to amuse himself how he may, while she busies herself elsewhere. If she has leisure and can sit down to her embroidery, he may read to her if he will, but it must be some sound romance, and not his own rondels, balades, and virelais in praise of her.

This description, though its details are drawn from Gower's lines, is nevertheless somewhat misleading. It suggests a character more concretely realized than the one which is actually presented through the Lover's eyes. These glimpses, diffused through a lengthy poem and eclipsed by the more important impression that they afford us of the Lover himself, his sincerity, his frustrations, even his activities, do not really give the impression of the courtly lady as a sensible, rather pre-occupied homebody. Certainly she is more real than Chretien's Guenevere, but she is still far more a type than a "flesh and blood" personage. Compared to Chaucer's Crisseyde,
or even Lady Bercilak, she hardly seems to breathe at all. As we shall see, Gower departs in his own way from the courtly love pattern, but he does not much use the Lady as his means. For the most part she remains all that Andreas would have had her, imperious, indistinct, a masterpiece of physical beauty, hard to win, and accustomed to the vassalage of men. On one important point Gower does not enlighten us: we are not told whether she is wife or maid. The apparent openness with which the Lover plies his suit—he leads her to the offering at church, rides about with her, and in general haunts her household all through the day—would seem to argue against the likelihood that she is married; in fact, Gower chooses to ignore the courtly ingredient of secrecy almost entirely. On the other hand, he knew the rules; there is no indication that the Lover intends to make an honest woman of his beloved or that such a step was necessary; the lady is mistress of her own affairs in a way which, in the Middle Ages, it was not possible for an unmarried girl to be. A third possibility, that the Lady, like Criseyde, was a widow—such a one, in fact, as the old poet himself might have wooed—would most easily fit the circumstances of the situation, but it is a barren hypothesis; in truth, the entire situation is as artificial as the Lady herself. It depends for its vitality on one element only, the characterization of the Lover. This, as it happens, is enough to give life, not only to a courtship which might
otherwise have seemed from the modern reader's standpoint an empty exercise, but also to the whole structure of the *Confessio Amantis*. The character of the Lover is one of the most imaginative of Gower's inventions—in fact, one of the most imaginative inventions in the entire development of courtly love literature.

Before considering this figure further, however, we would do well to consider in more detail the extent to which the poet understood the courtly rules on which he was to improvise in this characterization.

Gower's little known collection of love poems, the *Cinkante Balades*, of which there are actually fifty-two, afford the best opportunity of proving that the sober moralist could be as gallant as any courtier when he chose. They are not to be thought of as any more personal than, for example, the usual Elizabethan cycle of sonnets. Gower may even have written most of them in his old age. Further, different balades serve different purposes. The first five are composed for lovers who have matrimony in mind, five others are addressed by ladies to their lovers, and the last one of them is addressed to the mistress of all men, the Virgin herself. But most of the poems come within the narrow compass of the courtly code; in this connection, Macaulay says that

There is indeed a grace and poetical feeling in some of them which makes them probably the best things of the kind that have been produced by
English writers of French, and as good as anything of the kind which had up to that time been written in English.

To this, Dodd adds:

The noticeable feature of the Balades is their finish. Lifeless as they are, they prove the poet's ability to rival his French contemporaries in giving expression of the courtly love ideas with grace and elegance. This is as much as can be said for them.

All things considered, that seems quite a lot. However, it is their content that concerns us here. As for that, the courtly love conventions are all dealt with except, again, the requirement of secrecy. In this case, the omission is easily explained. Lyric poetry, unlike narrative, would allow little opportunity for expressing a condition more implicit than explicit. The other requirements are there: descriptions of the perfection and the inaccessibility of the lady occur in many of the poems; her sovereignty over her lover is also a commonplace; and in loving her, the lover transcends his ordinary self:

De l'averous il fait et loial,
Et de vilein courtois et liberal,
Et de couard plus fiers qe n'est leoun:
De l'envious il hoste tout le mal.

(Balades, L, 5-8.)

In the forty-eighth balade, Gower even sounds the deepest and, from one point of view, the most sinister, note in the scale of courtly values:
Amour est serf, amour est soverain;
En toutz erreurs amour se justifie.

(Balades, XLIII, 22-23.)

As for the art of love, the ritual through which passion is expressed, the balades abound in its conventions. The lover is humble, he is jealous, he lives to serve his lady's slightest wish, her eyes enslave him, and his heart, when he leaves her, remains behind. These poses are accompanied by appropriate references to the month of May, to Cupid, and to the flowers which the lady resembles.

In the sense that it was first conceived, courtly love was an elegant game to be played by a privileged few. In these poems Gower plays the game well; if personal feeling is lacking, it does not matter; the important thing is that he understands the rules.

Appropriately, the didactic element is totally absent. Gower is never more removed from his characteristic role of moralist than in the Balades, where he is the courtly poet par excellence. More significant, however, is the fact that in these poems he is hardly less removed from his role as love's poet in the Confessio Amantis. It is a point worth noting: Gower's proficiency with the rules of courtly love, as manifested in the Balades, throws light on the distortions to which the rules are subjected in the Confessio Amantis; those distortions are, in a word, deliberate.

Let us turn now to Gower's unhappy protagonist, the narrator of the Confessio. From the moment that his story proper begins,
in Book I, there is the presence of a tone, a mood, that is alien
to the mood of courtly love. To the perceptive but informed reader,
it may seem that the sober Gower has himself unduly entered into
the character of his hero. What proper courtly lover, after all, had;
ever borne his love as though it were a cross that he would be glad
to be rid of? And in what courtly lover had passion ever been so
accompanied by the faculty of reason? It is not that the Lover's
reason helps either to inflame or allay his feelings for his lady. On
the contrary, rationalization is quite helpless against this emotion
which

\[
\ldots \text{may nought be withstonde} \\
\text{For oght that men may understande.}
\]

\(\text{(CA, I, 91-92.)}\)

The Lover understands his predicament; but his understanding is
a helpless witness to the "maladie" that he has had for some time,
and which

\[
\ldots \text{myhte make a wisman madd,} \\
\text{If that it scholde longe endure.}
\]

\(\text{(CA, I, 130-1.)}\)

The discomfort was, of course, all part of the ritual. The courtly
lover was expected to endure sleepless nights, listlessness, and loss
of appetite. But it was a courtly sin for him to despair, to wish,
with his intellect, for relief from the passion that gripped him.
As far as the true courtly lover was concerned, the only relief worthy
of his consideration was to be had in the service, and, eventually,
the consummation, of his love. In contrast, Gower's poor hero simply wants to be let off, to be "hol" again; and it is significant that he does not specify how when he presents his case first to Venus and then to her priest. His suffering does not ennoble him, and, more important, the reader is not made to feel edified by witnessing it. From the first, his sympathy and compassion are elicited but not his admiration. The reader must come to the last lines of the *Confessio Amantis* before this curious circumstance is perfectly resolved, but when he does, the explanation does not really take him by surprise. The truth of the matter had been there from the first, when Venus had looked at the Lover and "cast on me no goodly chiere," (CA, I, 152), and, more subtly, in the way in which the Lover himself had reacted to his passion. He is, as the Confessor at last tells him, simply too old to be a courtly lover. The two conditions represent a hopeless paradox, and the Lover himself knows it; this knowledge constitutes his real suffering, and accounts for his hopelessness. It is an anguish unique in the subject matter of medieval literature, an anguish with which the various sorrows of Lancelot, Tristan, and Troilus have nothing to do.

The reader may be right, then, in suspecting that Gower has "entered into" the character of the Lover. The aging poet knew what he was writing about, and since he was generally lacking in
the Chaucerian ability to collect and assimilate widely differing human types, we may fairly speculate that in this characterization the old poet was at his most subjective. This impression is further strengthened by the Prologue and the first lines of the first book, in which Gower speaks in character, that is, as a moralist; there is no sense of transition when he assumes the role of lover, not even when the appearance of the king and the queen of love introduces the atmosphere of allegory. All this is in marked contrast to the Book of the Duchess or the Parliament of Fowls, for example, where the first person is purely a literary device. On the other hand, it does seem to presage the authentic personal note of the Kingis Quair. These considerations, much more than the fact that, in the eighth book, the Lover tells Venus that his name is John Gower, would indicate that the poet was speaking from personal experience.

In any case, the conception of a romantic passion in an aging man is a remarkable one, and it is surprising that even Gower's appreciators, though they comment on the poem's unusual ending, seem to feel that it comes as something of a surprise. As indicated above, the poet clearly had this climax in mind from the very beginning of the Confessio Amantis. It remains to be seen how appropriate the characterization of the Lover is in the light of it.
At one point, early in the *Confessio Amantis*, the Lover specifically refers to his younger days. It is not a clear indication of the fact that he is now old, but it is something more than a hint. Genius, the Confessor, has asked the Lover if he is guilty of hypocrisy, that is, of using tricks, of feigning illness, for example, in order that he "may have his desir," (CA, I, 682). The Lover makes the ardent avowal that such is not the case with him:

As forto feigne such sieknesse  
It nedeth noght, for this witesse  
I take of god, that my corage  
Hath ben mor siek than my visage.

But then, as an afterthought, he ruefully adds:

Bot Sire, if I have in my yowthe  
Don other wise in other place,  
I put me thereof in your grace.

(CA, I, 713-16, 730-32.)

Gower seems to take it for granted that we know at once of the penitent's "lockes hore," (CA, VIII, 2403). Whether he really did take it for granted, or whether he consciously chose to hold the full force of this realization until the last, is not too important. What does matter is that everything else which we learn about the Lover follows quite naturally from the fact that he is old.

There is, for example, the Lover's singular lack of heroism, a condition that hardly suited the courtly tradition. He has no delusions about being a knight-errant. In the fourth book, the Confessor recites one of the basic rules of the old courtly doctrine,
the idea that a true lover should be motivated to perform heroic deeds of arms in order to win favor with his lady. He must be willing to go across the "grete se"

So that be londe and ek by Schipe He mot travaile for worschipe And make manye hastyf rodes, Somtime in Prus, somtime in Rodes, And somtime into Tartarie; So that these heraldz on him crie, 'Vailant, vailant, lo wher he goth.' And thanne he yifth hem gold and cloth, So that his fame mihte springe, And to his ladi Ere bringe Som tidinge of his worthinesse.

(CA, IV, 1627-37.)

To this inspiring injunction, the Lover gives an answer unique in the literature of courtly love. It is candid, respectful, even a bit mournful, and it contains an interesting mixture of candid self-interest, and Christian humanitarianism; but more important, it is everything that a courtly lover would not say:

For this I telle you in schrifte, That me were levere hir love winne Than Kaire and al that is ther inne: And forte sien the heten alle, I not what good ther mihte falle, So mochel blod thogh ther be schad. This finde I writen, hou Crist had That noman other scholde sle. What scholde I winne over the Se, If I mi ladi loste at hom?

(CA, IV, 1656-65.)

With these reasonable, though not perfectly connected, arguments Gower has put aside not only the courtly rules but also the greater part of the
ideology of chivalry. The disenchantment with crusade, which characterized the later Middle Ages, is precisely stated. Worldly power and the love of one's lady are presented as opposing ends rather than complementary means of acquiring honor. And the relationship of lady and lover is reduced to a decidedly human, rather pragmatic level.

The Lover does go on to say that, if his lady insisted, he would, after all, "fie thurghout the depe Se" (CA, IV, 1715), but the prospect would certainly not appeal to him. He has seen the way of the world, and it does not strike him that "travaile" does lovers much good; at least nowadays:

Bot this I se, on daies nou
The blinde god, I wot noght how,
Cupido, which of love is lord,
He set the thinges in discord,
That thei that lest to love entende
Fulofte he w ole hem yive and sende
Most of his grace; and thus I finde
That he that scholde go behinde,
Goth many a time ferr tofore.

(CA, IV, 1731-39.)

Gower carries his heresy to its logical conclusion. The same indifferent chance that prevails in matters of high adventure applies equally to all the niceties of courtly love which lovers are expected to practice in the presence of their ladies:

For everemore I finde it so,
The more besinesse I leie,
The more that I knele and preie
With goode wordes and with softe,
The more I am refused ofte,
With besinesse and mai noght winne.

(CA, IV, 1746-51.)

He himself goes through all the kneeling, praying, and the rest of it readily enough; but he has grown wise, if to be wise is to forfeit one's illusions:

Sei, what availeth al the dede,
Which nothing helpeth at nede?

(CA, IV, 1761-62.)

At times, the Confessor himself can be practical, though not necessarily at the expense of his role as a priest of love. Dodd has pointed out that he does not seem to hold with the courtly convention that requires a lover to be unassuming in the presence of his lady, as the penitent confesses himself to be.\(^{13}\) But this attitude is really not out of place in the context in which it occurs. The Confessor, in subdividing the sin of Sloth, refers to "lachesce," that is, the faculty of letting one's opportunities pass one by. It is the Lover who construes this fault to apply to his own shyness; thus, he admits he is guilty of postponing the opportunity to speak his mind to his lady. However, it is not a matter of laziness; rather, he is in this case behaving like a good courtly lover: he is overwhelmed, struck dumb, by admiration of his beloved and by his own feelings of inadequacy:

I not what thing was in my thought,
Or it was drede, or it was shame.

(CA, IV, 48-49.)
The important thing to note here is not that Gower argues for or against the courtly convention, but that he emphasizes the quite natural human emotion that, in this case, underlies it. In the process, he makes the predicament quite believable, as it might apply to an elderly man.

The important role of jealousy in the roster of the Lover's emotions is also in keeping with the courtly tradition, with the natural circumstances of loving and particularly with the state of mind of an aged lover. For we soon discover that the Lover is not the only one who pays court to the Lady. She is, it would seem, besieged by admirers, ten or twelve of them, and the unhappy penitent is accordingly besieged by fits of jealousy. In the second book, the Confessor discusses the sin of envy and asks the Lover if he is guilty. The answer is "ye, a thousand sithe."

Whanne I have sen an other blithe
Of love, and hadde a goodly chiere,
Ethna, which brenneth yer be yere,
Was thanne noght so hot as I
Of thilke Sor which prively
Min hertes thoght withinne brenneth.

(CA, II, 18-23.)

A few lines further on, while still describing his jealousy, the Lover again touches lightly on the muted theme of his age:

Whan I the Court se of Cupide
Aproche unto my ladi side
Of hem that lusti ben and freisse, --15
Thogh it availe hem noght a reisse,
Bot only that thei ben in speche--
My sorwe is thanne noght to seche.
(CA, II, 39-44.)

Later on in the same book he confesses himself to be a detractor,
always ready to indulge the unmanly urge to belittle his competitors.
The reader is again reminded of the Lover's age indirectly; Gower
calls these fellow suitors a "yonge lusty route" (CA, II, 461). In
his confession, he first tries to diminish his guilt by pointing out
that such young fellows are bent on deceiving an innocent; but then,
as though he were acquiring self-knowledge while he speaks, he
produces this sad but rather moving admission:

And natheles, the soth to telle,
In certain if it so befelle
That althertrewest man ybore,
To chese among a thousand score,
Which were alfulli forto triste,
Mi ladi lovede, and I it wiste,
Yit rathere thanne he scholde spede,
I wolde swiche tales sprede
To my ladi, if that Iamyhte,
That I scholde al his love unrihte,
And therto wolde I do mi peine.
(CA, II, 497-507.)

There are other evidences throughout the Confessio Amantis
of the Lover's capacity for jealousy. More to the point, Gower has
shaped the emotion to the character of an elderly man. Not only the
references to the youthfulness of the other suitors but also the Lover's
methods of competing with them suggest his age. He may still be hot-
hearted, but he is too old to be hot-headed. He can not react to a
jealous impulse by fighting his competitors, which would have been the courtly remedy. Instead, he must resort to "bakbitinge," and does to an extent that greatly shames him.

There are other instances when the Lover fails to fulfill the courtly love doctrine. When the Confessor discusses the sin of Despair, the Lover must admit that he is guilty. According to the rules of courtly love, the suitor should never despair, and yet the Lover does:

> And thus I mai you sothli telle,  
> Save only that I crie and bidde,  
> I am in Tristesce al amida  
> And fulfild of Deseperance.  

*(CA, IV, 3496-99.)*

The Lover’s lack of heroism, his use of detraction, and his despair are examples of Gower’s generally successful attempt to adapt the rules of courtly love to the characterization of an aged lover, even to the point where adaptation becomes an outright refutation of the courtly code. He changes whatever in the doctrine does not suit the characterization and leaves the rest alone. Indeed, some of the sins that the Lover confesses, as well as many of the virtues that he claims, are definitely the traits of a courtly lover. They belong to him because they are not inconsistent with the behavior of an old man in whom the sap of youth still runs high. For example, he is patient, humble, constant, generous, and always courteous in his dealings with the lady whom he loves.
In the foregoing pages, the point has been to indicate that Gower, throughout the *Confessio Amantis*, conceived of the Lover as an old man, (perhaps, but not necessarily, because he was himself no longer young when he wrote the poem,) and that he indicated as much by the general tone of his work and by more or less specific allusions which, from time to time, the Lover makes to his age. Further, the poet used the rules of courtly love, or discarded them, depending upon whether they suited the character of an aged man or not.

In view of all this, Dodd's statement concerning the end of the *Confessio Amantis* seems as disconcerting to the writer as the conclusion of the poem apparently was to him:

> It is with a distinct shock that we learn, having followed the perfectly natural story of the lover's fortunes, that, after all, he is only an old man whose "lockes hore" do not accord with "loves lust." We wish that the poet might have chosen a less bungling way of ending his poem. Of course, it is necessary in a love-vision, which Gower's poem practically is, to have the hero dismissed with some word of approval or with an injunction appropriate, in either case, to the part that he has played throughout the story. . . . In the *Confessio*, on the other hand, after being led to think of the hero as a young man,

> A lovyere and a lusty bachelere,

we are confronted with the statement that it is only John Gower, the gray-haired old poet. The spectacle of "old Grisel" growing cold about the heart and lying there in a swoon for love, is incongruous, to say the
least. A poet with more imagination and with less desire to make clear the fact that his chief interest was in moral affairs, would certainly have devised a more attractive conclusion for a poem which, in its main features, is not without attractive qualities. Dodd's study of Gower's poetry in its relationship to the theme of courtly love is the only detailed work that has been written on the subject. On the basic matter discussed above, he has entirely missed the point. It is simply not true that we have been "led to think of the hero as a young man," or that the ending is "incongruous," On the contrary, the revelation of the Lover's advanced age has been prepared for, and it has everything to do with the purpose of the poem. Beyond this, Dodd seems to feel that Gower should have dismissed the Lover in a manner more in keeping with the usual courtly tradition. In other words, the poet's originality is here not welcomed.

May we not see a pattern in this type of Gower criticism? In the preceding chapter, it was remarked that Professors Wedel and Fox had found Gower too didactic and not enough of a scientific specialist, respectively. Here he is at fault because his work violates the conventional pattern of courtly love literature. One begins to wonder if Gower's critics are not too specialized in their various approaches to his many-sided poem. It must be dealt with on its own terms and with all of its many aspects in mind, or not at all.

Let us look for ourselves at the conclusion of the Confessio
Amantis. In the eighth book, the Lover has completed his shrift and asks the Confessor's advice. Genius has in the meantime measured his man, and now he tells him that his cause is lost and that his salvation lies in a return to reason:

Thus folweth it, if thou travaile,
Wher thou no profit has ne pris,
Thou art toward thisel unwis.

(CA, VIII, 2092-94.)

The Lover, in contrast to the prototype of the courtly lover, is willing enough to escape the service of the god "which that blind was evere," but he does not know how. With a justifiable bitterness he reproaches the Confessor for telling him, an incurable, that he should get well:

Mi wo to you is bot a game,
That fielen noght of that I fiele.

(CA, VIII, 2152-53.)

At length the Confessor agrees to take a letter of supplication to Venus, written in the Lover's tears. After further delay, the goddess lets herself be seen. She promises the old man relief but wisely adds that her medicine may be

Noght all perchance as ye it wolden,
Bot so as ye be reson scholden,
Acordant unto loves kinde.

(CA, VIII, 2369-71.)

"Halwynge of scorn," she tells him that for such an old fellow it

Betre is to make a beau retreat."

(CA, VIII, 2416.)
The Lover suddenly becomes pale, his heart turns cold, and he swoons. While in this state, he seems to see Cupid approach, and following him, a company of lovers, led by "lusty Youthe."

Tristram and Iseult, Lancelot and Guenevere, and a host of others troop gaily by, among them four notably faithful wives: Penelope, Alceste, Alcione, and Lucrece. As they pass, Youth takes no heed of the Lover. This group is followed by another, a somewhat smaller one, led by Elde, who "cam a softe pas." This company, composed of such more stately personages as King David, Solomon, Aristotle, and Vergil, intercedes for the unhappy Lover, abetted now even by some of the younger troupe.

Venus summons Cupid, and while the lovers of olden times press around, some of them debating among themselves the folly of love in the old, and some remarking

\[
\ldots\text{That the wylde loves rage}\\\text{In mannes lif forberth non Age,}\\\ldots\\(\text{CA, VIII, 2773-74.})
\]

Cupid draws out the dart with which the Lover had been pierced in the opening lines of the first book. Venus applies a cold ointment, and then gives the old man a mirror and bids him look into it:

\[
\text{Wherinne anon myn hertes yhe}\\\text{I caste, and sih my colour fade,}\\\text{Myn yhen dymme and al unglade,}\\\text{Mi chiekes thinne, and al my face}\\\text{With Elde I myhte se deface,}
\]
So riveled and so wo besein
That ther was nothing full ne plein,
I syh also myn heres hore.
Mi will was tho to se nomore
Outwith, for ther was no plesance.

(CA, VIII, 2824-33.)

"Mi will was tho to se nomore." In that cruel moment, disenchantment brings with it the cold light of reason. Venus laughs at the old man and asks him what love is. His answer is that he does not know. He begs to be excused from the court of the goddess, and she consents. Before he leaves, however, the Confessor absolves him, and Venus hangs about his neck a pair of "bedes blak and Sable" upon which are inscribed the golden letters, "Por reposer." Then Venus and the Confessor vanish in a starry sky. The Lover is for a moment stunned; then he smiles as he becomes aware of the beads, the symbol of that which transcends earthly passions.

And in this wise, soth to seyn,
Homward a softe pas y wente.

(CA, VIII, 2966-7.)

Gower ends the poem by reverting to the themes which he had touched upon in the Prologue. There has been some objection to the anti-climatic prayer that the poet addressed to God, in which he prays for peace and stability in the realm; and also to his concluding palinode in which he rejects passionate love in favor of such love as the high God sends us, which may save body and soul,

So that above in thilke place
Wher resteth love and alle pes,
Oure joie mai ben endeles.

(CA, VIII, 3170-72.)

It is true that if Gower had left off with his journey homewards, he might have left the reader more deeply moved than by the lines that follow. However, there is no reason to insist that Gower has said too much. He has brought us back from the world of his misspent love to the real world in which he now dwells--the same world which he had left in the Prologue of his poem. After the climax of rejection, this is his denouement.

Even so, it is with the image of the chastened, elderly ex-Lover still clearly before us that we come to the end of the Confessio Amantis. This is the sombre but decidedly noble ending which Professor Dodd found "incongruous."

Fortunately, in his The Allegory of Love C. S. Lewis went a long way towards reevaluating the poet's worth in this connection. He too seems strangely to regard the conclusion of the poem as a complete surprise, at least on the reader's part, but he has this to say about it--and his commentary is worth quoting at length:

For him /Gower/ as for Chaucer, the love which he celebrates is a sin, and in the lover Will has usurped dominion over Resoun. Gower is not enough of a philosopher to achieve, like Dante, or even to attempt, like Alanus, any reconciliation between the claims of his two worlds: but he is much too careful and sincere an artist to be content with some formal palinode which would
stultify the whole of the rest of his poem. He solves the problem by keeping his eye on the object. He finds in his own experience—the experience of an old man—how Life itself manages the necessary palinode; and then manages his in the same way. It is Old Age which draws the sting of love, and his poem describes the process of this disappointing mercy. ... Is this an allegorical presentation of the death of love—or of love only? Or is it the voice of Life itself? The answer is that it is both; for doubtless it is a rule in poetry that if you do your own work well, you will find you have done also work you never dreamed of. And so with all the other elements in Gower’s closing scene.20

All the images which Gower uses—the troupes of lovers and the aged, the withdrawn arrow, the cold ointment, and the beads—become the symbols of a process that is basic to all human experience. The lesson that the Lover learns is one which all of us must learn if we live long enough.

Gower, then, has used the aged Lover as a means of being "moral" after all. Life itself, that is, the experience of God's natural law, is the final proof against the romantic conception of love.

Lewis, in his penetrating but all too brief glance at the conclusion of the Confessio Amantis, has suggested the profound motivation of the Lover's odyssey from passion to reason without, surprisingly, discussing very much the means that Gower had at his command. Had he considered them more closely, he might have been more impressed with the conscious, as well as the unconscious, art with which the poet carried out his conception. Lewis describes Gower's transference
of the Lover's predicament to a universal plane in terms of the few
lines in which that transference is made explicit: these passages,
which have been described above, are among those rare cases "in
which medieval allegory rises to myth, in which the symbols, though
fashioned to represent single concepts, take on new life and represent
rather the principles--not otherwise accessible--which unite whole
classes of concepts." 21 This is all quite true. But how?

Of one thing we may be sure: the effect which Lewis describes
is not simply the result of the heightened power of a single passage.
In order to explain it, or at least try to, it is necessary to take a
closer look at Gower's use of allegory, in which the Lover and
Genius, the Confessor, have the most important roles to play. The
landscape of the Confessio Amantis is the allegorical dream-land
of all the medieval poets who had felt the influence of the Roman de
la Rose. But Gower dispenses with the usual lover's sleep and
dream. Like Dante, he transfers his first person narrator into the
realm of the abstract by simply arranging for him to wander into it. 22

In previous references to the Vox Clamantis we have already seen how
effectively--albeit conventionally--he could handle the dream vision.
But here he did not choose to use it; at least, the dream is a waking
one. The obvious explanation is that he wished to give to the Lover's
predicament a heightened reality, a sense of having been directly
felt, which the dream device would have hindered. It is tempting
to overemphasize the poet's accomplishment in this and other re-
spects; the pendulum of Gower criticism has been for so long lodged
at its negative pole that one is perhaps in danger of being too anxious
to give the poet his due. Yet the more one considers the effect of
the whole poem, the more it seems probable that at least most of
Gower's many smaller variations on the style of medieval love poetry
were carefully chosen by the poet for the purpose of influencing that
total effect. Such lesser changes have their own part to play in build-
ing up to what is truly original in Gower's poem, and inarguably the
result of a real literary artistry: the unique reality of the Lover,
the cumulative interest of the dialectic that take place between him
and Genius, and the noble conclusion of the work.

We have reason here to mention Gower's name again in the
same breath with Dante's. Erich Auerbach, in one of the tour de
forces that compose his Mimesis, explains the Italian poet's power
to infuse an intense reality into the description of the souls who
populate his after-world. He accounts for this reality, which is
removed from all the usual appurtenances of everyday life, in terms
of the patristic habit of figural interpretation. The Divine Comedy,
according to his explanation, is "based on a figural view of things":

In the case of three of its most important
characters--Cato of Utica, Virgil, and Beatrice--
I have attempted to demonstrate that their appearance
in the other world is a fulfillment of their appearance on earth, their earthly appearance a figure of their appearance in the other world. I stressed the fact that a figural scheme permits both its poles—the figure and its fulfillment—to retain the characteristics of concrete historical reality, in contrast to what obtains with symbolic or allegorical personifications, so that figure and fulfillment—although the one "signifies" the other—have a significance which is not incompatible with their being real. 

In Gower's characterization of the Lover, something of the same process that Auerbach describes may be discerned. It is not to be supposed that Gower had been influenced by the Italian poet—though he knew of him—but both had drawn deeply from the same patristic vein of thought. It was almost inevitable, even in a work dealing with love, that as soon as Gower's imagination came into play, the abstract canvas that he chose should be a figural one, in which the Lover, rather than being merely an allegorical representation of the courtly lover, after the fashion of the Roman de la Rose, should seem a real person at the moment of his "fulfillment"—that is, at the final moment towards which his role as lover had inevitably led him. For a man such as Gower, that final moment could not be a romantic one. But, interestingly enough, in attempting to realize this archetype of the Lover as he exists within a God-ordered universe—that is, disenchanted, chastened—Gower has made
his characterization, his "fulfillment" independent of the abstract state that he is meant to represent. No one who has read the Confessio Amantis can doubt that the Lover has an individuality that completely transcends his "figural" significance. In this sense, Gower's achievement earns him a place among the very few writers who during the medieval period were to contribute to the humanization of characters in literature. The figural method, even more, perhaps, than Gower's own probable identification with his protagonist, helps to explain how, in the case of the Lover, that humanization comes about.

This figural realism imbues the Lover's shrift with considerable significance. Gower would have us believe that it is he who is speaking, and, as previously noted, that may to some extent be the case. The old poet seems to know a great deal about the feelings of despairing passion which he describes. But had he chosen merely to relate a personal experience, the result would have been, so to speak, realism without the "figure." On the other hand, if he had contented himself with an impersonal abstraction, the result would have been the reverse. His solution can best be evaluated if we consider for a moment the other party in the dialogue which motivates the poem, that is, the Confessor, Genius. The part that Genius plays can only be explained by the fact that he, as well
as the first person narrator, represents the poet's point of view. His impersonal advice and his rather didactic and moral attitude are really more consistent with Gower's usual literary personality than is the character of the Lover—which does not help to make him the more real of the two. That, however, is not surprising; his function in the poem is to represent the objective natural law of the universe, not a human type or condition. Under the circumstances, Gower could hardly give him a very humanized characterization. The Lover, in whom the laws of nature are seen to operate, can remain a three-dimensional being; but the Confessor, the embodiment of natural law, is bound to begin and end as an allegorical abstraction, and so he does. Yet without him and the colloquy which results from his confrontation with the Lover, the latter's own figural realism would not have been achieved. Genius, in other words, is the means by which the Lover—who begins by being simply a lover, an aged one—becomes the representation of Aged Love itself, uniting "whole classes of concepts" while at the same time retaining his original character.

The part that I have described as belonging to the Confessor is not, of course, the one that he ostensibly plays in the Confessio Amanitis. Rather, it has to do with the effect that his long continuing dialogue with the Lover is bound to have on the reader who follows their conversation from beginning to end of the poem. In literal
terms, Genius is simply the priest of love. 24 But almost all of Gower's critics have remarked on the inconsistency that the Confessor demonstrates in that capacity. Not only does Genius frequently contravene the precepts of courtly love in favor of more moral, or more practical alternatives, 25 but he actually questions the divinity of the goddess herself in the fifth book of the Confessio Amantis, when he is discussing the pantheon of the classical dieties. 26 It is not that "Venus and the court of Love are but idle dreams and feigned consecrations of human infirmities." 27 On the contrary, the world that they represent is real enough, in the sense that all temporal things are real. But their "oghne Prest," who represents the natural order, is only being consistent in denying the absolutism of their power, (a denial which Venus herself indirectly seconds when she at last releases the Lover from her service). For, in the patristic view of life, the natural law includes that very process of aging, as well as the original impulse of passionate love, by means of which man is brought to Reason, and hence to the contemplation of eternity. The exhaustion of love, as well as love itself, is "be weie of kinde," and thus within the province of the Confessor.

Gower's use of the Confessor may best be explained in terms of a transference of ideas. In his most narrow meaning, Genius is the priest of love. But Gower unmistakably associates love with
sexual desire. And he regards sexual desire, not surprisingly, as "be weie of kinde," that is, as a basic law of nature. Now, as noted in the preceding chapter, Gower believed that natural law was God's law, in keeping with one aspect of patristic thought. According to this view, nature is not at odds with reason, any more than reason is at odds with spiritual revelation. True, reason modifies our "lustes":

For God the lawes hath assiszed
As well to reson as to kinde,
Bot he the bestes wolde binde
Only to lawes of nature,
Bot to the mannes creature
God yaf him reson withal,
Whereof that he nature shcal
Upon the causes modefie,
That he schal do no lecherie,
And yit he schal his lustes have.

(CA, VII, 5372-81.)

But in any case the law of nature is not rejected. On the contrary, nature itself, in a literal as well as an analogical sense, leads to an understanding of God. In the Confessio Amantis, the figure of the Confessor represents all of these related ideas: sexual desire, passionate love, the law of "kinde," and that process of aging which is included in natural law and by means of which man is brought to reason and hence to the contemplation of his eternal salvation. Only when Genius has represented all of these conditions does he vanish; he has fulfilled his function and left the Lover in the domain of the
higher law of reason. Gower had only to name the Confessor "Natura" in order to make his concept precise. But, as it is, this larger role of Genius is consistently presented, if one leaves aside the narrowest interpretation of his title, priest of love.

From the foregoing remarks, the reader will have already gathered for himself the themes that dominate Gower's colloquy between Genius and the aged Lover. However, in view of the frequent epitath, "commonplace," that has been leveled at the poet, it might be well to restate those themes, which most certainly exist in the Confessio Amantis. They revolve around the concept of the death of passionate love, a concept scarcely touched on in the secular literature of the Middle Ages. In order to deal with this subject, Gower has created a unique characterization, a lover who is old. Of course, the senex amans, the elderly man made ridiculous by his passion, had long been a staple of comic writers; but Gower's serious treatment of the subject is enough to make all the difference. Furthermore, he has completely refashioned the heretical code of courtly love in order to make the Lover's passion conform to a deeply moral vision of life, in part by introducing the element of Time, symbolized by the Lover's age. The poet sees love, and, in a larger sense, all behavior that is "be weie of kinde," not as the irreconcilable adversary of man's spiritual self, but as an inevitable and in many ways helpful force, which leads him finally to the contemplation of God and
salvation. The natural laws--represented by the Confessor--that have reduced the old suitor to a pitiable state at the opening of the first book are the same that have left him with a thoughtful smile and a prayer on his lips in the last lines. Notice that the Lover has not renounced nature; with a much deeper insight than most medieval men possessed, Gower has had nature renounce the Lover. That, after all, is the way that renunciations usually come about.

But even more than these noble ideas, which the "figure" of the Lover summons up, Gower's greatest achievement is the almost incidental, but none the less powerful, reality of the aged protagonist. In making the Lover old, in drawing, perhaps, on his own experience, and, most importantly, in removing the emotion of love from the usually unreal, or, at any rate, hyperbolic and heroic atmosphere of romance literature, the poet has achieved a characterization unique in medieval literature. His lover is no knight-errant, no Trojan hero; he is hardly a hero at all in the conventional sense. What dignity he achieves, and it is considerable, he comes by in the course of ordinary human experience. The love from which he suffers is one which the modern reader can understand and believe in. True, this accomplishment is not enough to win for Gower a title to universality; the allegorical construction of the poem, among other things, offsets
any such claim. But it does justify us in crediting the old moralist with the distinction of being the first medieval poet to genuinely humanize, or, perhaps more exactly, to domesticate, the still relatively new emotion of romantic love.
CHAPTER IV

FOOTNOTES

1 For example, cf. W. A. Neilson, The Origins and Sources of the Court of Love (Boston, 1899), and C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (London, 1938; New York, 1959, paperback), pp. I-III.

2 Romance literature had, of course, begun to flourish in the English language long before the fourteenth century, but as W. P. Ker has said in English literature: Medieval (New York, 1912), p. 727, "The English took the adventurous, sensational part of the French romances, and let the language of the heart alone."


4 Works, II, xv.

5 Works, loc. cit.

6 Works, I, lxxiii.

7 Works, I, lxxv.

8 William George Dodd, "Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower (Gloucester, Mass., 1959), p. 41.

9 Gower's Traitie, on the other hand, is one of the first poems that I know of in which a poet of any nationality applies some of the rules of courtly love to the estate of matrimony. Cf. Works, I, lxxxiii-lxxxv, and pp. 379-392.

10 The Confessor, as we might expect of a priest of Venus, usually expresses the courtly idea of the ennobling effect of love (IV, 2296-2315,) but the opinion is not echoed by the Lover.
11 Lewis, op. cit., p. 217; and Dodd, op. cit., p. 81.

12 "When we moderns speak of adventure, we mean something unstable, peripheral, disordered. All this is precisely what the word does not mean in courtly romance. On the contrary, trial through adventure is the real meaning of the knight's ideal existence." Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. W. Trask (New York, 1957), p. 118.

13 Dodd, pp. 87-88.

14 Andreas had insisted on jealousy as a necessary ingredient of love. The Confessor condemns it; but the Lover complies with the requirement—not, one feels, because Gower wished to keep him in the courtly love tradition, but because jealousy was an inevitable part of the condition of an aged lover. Cf. Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love, trans. John Jay Parry (New York, 1941), p. 101.

15 Italics mine.

16 Dodd, p. 69.

17 I should perhaps emphasize that in stating this I refer only to the Lover and not to the Confessor, who often digresses from the courtly doctrine in instances that have nothing to do with the Lover's age. The Confessor, interestingly enough, often assumes a moral character in a way that the Lover does not: he usually accepts the courtly doctrine only to the extent that its virtues correspond to Christian virtues, its vices to Christian vices. When the comparison cannot be made, he seems to forget that he is a priest of love, not a clerk. For example, in his discussion of Contek and Homicide (III, 1089-2621), the Priest advises the Lover that his passions should be ruled by reason—a good scholastic doctrine but hardly a courtly one. The result is that the religion of love is distorted not only by the Lover, but by the Confessor; and each does this in separate ways. The doctrine is modified by the Lover in terms of his age; it is modified by the Confessor in terms of Christian values. The two conditions often dove-tail neatly; thus, the Confessor can deplore despair without violating the courtly or Christian codes; and the Lover can be, and is, guilty of it because he is old.

18 Dodd, pp. 81-83.

19 Lewis, op. cit., p. 222.
20 Lewis, p. 222.

21 Lewis, p. 213.

22 Gower’s originality in this respect has been the occasion of another typical example of the kind of criticism to which the poet has been subjected: "Without any attempt to produce versimilitude by using the conventional machinery of dreams, after the manner of Chaucer and the French poets, Gower relates how, being in the agonies of love, he went out into the woods and met Cupid and Venus," (italics mine). W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, I (London, 1906), 312.


24 E. C. Knowlton has traced the evolution of the figure of Genius from its origin in Plato’s Timaeus, through the "half-grotesque" treatment by Jean de Meun, to some of its later manifestations, in his "Genius As An Allegorical Figure," MLN, XXXIX (1924), 89-95, Gower's version is original with him and owes little but the name to earlier writers.

25 For some departures from the courtly code, cf. Dodd, pp. 63-76.

26 CA, V, 1382-1443.

27 Lewis, p. 219.

28 Gower’s Lover does not dwell on the sexual aspect of his passion but in brief passages he is explicit enough. Cf. CA, II, 2410-12, IV, 1138-1149.
THE STRUCTURE OF THE CONFESSIO AMANTIS

If there was no analogue in medieval literature for Gower's idea of the Lover, it is equally true that no model existed for the structure of the work which the poet built around his woe-begone protagonist. Most examples of courtly love literature were amorphous affairs as far as organization was concerned, being based upon the rather disconnected adventures of one or more knights, "an elaborate fabric woven out of a number of themes which alternated with one another like threads of a tapestry."¹ Gower's poem, of course, has nothing to do with knightly adventure at all; but even when it is compared with the genre of love-allegory, or love-vision, of which the Roman de la Rose is the prototype, there is, as will be seen, little to which the structure of the Confessio Amantis may be related. In terms of its organization, Gower had designed a work which was as much a literary tour-de-force as the Decameron or the Canterbury Tales, though it shared with those works the need of a framework upon which many tales could be hung. It is irrelevant to the present discussion to regret that in the Confessio Amantis
we do not have, as with Chaucer, a scheme that admits a gallery of portraits that is also a social spectrum, or, as with Boccaccio, an insight into the life of a famous city and its people. Gower's purpose in telling his stories was not the same as that of his two contemporaries, who wished chiefly to amuse. If our poet's aim has not proven as durable as theirs, so much the worse for him; but it is a mistake to suppose that, within the limitations of the goal he had set himself, he was less imaginative, less original than they. The Confessio Amantis was intended to satisfy a need on the part of its potential audience that had scarcely been catered to before, namely, to cloak moral didacticism in the guise of entertainment—"to sugar-coat" knowledge, as Sidney would describe the process two centuries later. And in order to carry out his purpose, Gower was to devise a plan for his poem that was as unique, if not as elaborate, as anything in medieval literature.

Since even the most sympathetic of Gower's critics has described the Confessio Amantis as merely well-built rather than original,² it would seem to be worthwhile to discuss the plan of the poem in some detail.

To begin with, there is no reason to doubt Gower's own account, in the earliest version of the Prologue, of the initiative that King Richard gave him for writing the poem,
For that thing may nought be refused
Which that a king himselve bit.
(\textit{CA}, Prol., 74-5.)

The young sovereign had summoned the poet to join him aboard his barge one day in 1390, when Gower was boating on the Thames. Among other matters that were mentioned between them, Richard bade his subject to write "Som newe thing" with the understanding that he would himself peruse the finished work. But the king's injunction could not have been other than a general one; it was up to the old poet to decide what would amuse his master and yet serve his own purposes.

From the moment that he began thinking of the proposed work, it seems clear that he had in mind a poem that would entertain—specifically by dealing with the always popular subject of love—and at the same time instruct, in the academic as well as the moral sense of the word. The combination of these aims has never been a common one in literature; and certainly during the Middle Ages the incompatibility of amatory and instructive interests was more acute than it has ever been since. The problem of reconciling the two was thorny, but it apparently never occurred to the old poet to be deterred by it. When he wrote the Prologue, assuming that he wrote it first, he had a clear idea of his twofold purpose. He would

\ldots write in such a maner wise,
Which may be wisdom to the wise
And pley to hem that lust to pleye.
(\textit{CA}, Prol., 83-5.)
In the first lines of the first book, he feels that it is necessary
to justify what for him is a change of pace:

> I may nought streche up to the hevene
Min hand, ne setten al in evene
This world, which evere is in balance:
It stant noght in my sufficance
So grete things to compasse,
Bot I mot lete it overpasse
And treten upon othre things.
Forthi the Stile of my writings
From this day forth I thenke change
And speke of thing is noght to strange,
Which every kinde hath upon honde,
And whereupon the world mot stonde,
And hath don sithen it began,
And schal whil ther is any man;
And that is love, of which I mene
As after schal be sene.

(CA, I, 1-16.)

He immediately makes clear, however, that he has not joined the
ranks of the courtly love poets without deep reservations. The
profound connection that he was to draw between the laws of love
and the laws of God, which was discussed in the previous chapter,
is implied as soon as he begins to define the emotion:

> And natheles ther is noman
In al this world so wys, that can
Of love tempre the mesure,
But as it faith in aventure:
. . . . . . . . . . . .
For yet was nevere such covine
That couthe ordeine a medicine
To thing which god in lawe of kinde
Hath set, for ther may noman finde
The rihte salve of such a Sor.

(CA, I, 21-24, 29-33.
Italics mine.)

His exposition of a lover's passion will not be an ennobling
tale, but rather an exemplum, a warning against an inevitable mad-
ness that "may noght be withstonde;"

A poem about love necessitated, obviously, a lover and his lady. But the reader immediately discovers that he will never meet the latter face-to-face. She remains always in the background; only the Lover confronts us. And the result of his confession is not to bring us to an understanding of the whole story of his relationship with his beloved; we never learn how they met, who she is, or what are the precise emotional stages through which the suitor passes in his love for her. As a matter of act, there is little to tell on that score. From first to last, as we also quickly learn, it has been an unsuccessful, one-sided affair. What comes through to us is a single element in the relationship, the unhappiness that it has caused the Lover.

As simply as this, Gower set the mood in which his poem about love would be cast. But the mood had to be sustained by reason-
able causes, and at the same time the poet had to use it to justify in his own fashion the objective laws of God even as they affected the most lawless of passions. His solution, drawn, no doubt, from the experience of his own declining years, was both simple and orginal: to interject the element of Time into the domain of romantic love, an intrusion which Venus and her court understandably do not welcome. Its presence is felt in the fact of the Lover's age, and, perhaps more important, in the way which the fact colors his view
of his own emotions. It was a point of view which Gower deliberately assumed; that he need not have used it, the Cinkante Balades amply proves.

The dialogue method lay ready to Gower's hand as the means of disclosing both the dilemma of his protagonist and its solution. The technique was commonplace in medieval literature, although, significantly, it was not ordinarily used in works concerned with romantic love. Gower, with his dual purpose in mind, had next to invent the second party in his dialogue, one who could both instruct and amuse the reader. His solution, the figure of the Confessor, had only an indistinct precedent in the literature of the Middle Ages. Gower himself quite likely did not realize all the possibilities of this priest of love when he first conceived of the poem; the Confessor only gradually acquires the characteristics of the larger allegorical concept of natural law. But it is to the poet's credit that, as the latter signification of Genius becomes more dominant, the former is not lost. Romantic love, as Gower sees it, is natural, not "courtly." It is from nature that it takes its rules, and so there is no paradox in the idea of Genius as representative of both love and nature.

The idea of a confession must have evolved simultaneously with that of the Confessor, though the connection between the two
was not inevitable; the reader will remember that in the *Roman de la Rose* Genius is a confessor in little more than name: Nature, far from reciting her sins to him, uses him as a sounding board while she describes her realm. The use of the confession as the framework of a true dialogue is a wholly original device on Gower's part.

The poet's next innovation was to employ the Seven Deadly Sins as the means of apportioning the various parts of his confession-dialogue. Parodies of religious ceremonies and doctrines in acting out the rules of courtly lover were not an uncommon part of the game; but, as we shall see, the Seven Deadly Sins of the Catholic catechism had never before been used in the explication of romantic passion. Even more remarkable, Gower used them without violating the spirit of Christianity: the sins against the law of love, as the poet defines the emotion, are also sins against the law of Nature, and that, of course, means that they are sins, in so far as they go, against the law of God.

The use of the Seven Deadly Sins provided Gower with exactly the kind of device he needed to exploit the confession as the vehicle for a very large number of tales and exempla. A discussion of each sin, and its subdivisions, would enable Genius to set forth, in almost limitless variety, whole reams of stories by means of which the Lover would be enlightened, and the reader both enlightened and
entertained. Such an anthology was a rarity in Gower's day. If each tale contained a moral and if each was meant to contribute to the larger instructive purpose of the Confessio Amantis, that was all to the good, but there can be no doubt that the popularity of the poem during the two centuries to follow was due primarily to the simple fact that it contained so many diverting, well told tales. It was chiefly through these tales that Gower fulfilled the entertainment part of his dual purpose without sacrificing his determination to educate his readers.

From this succession of ingenious concepts, (a) the aged lover, (b) a dialogue in the form of a shrift, (c) a confessor who is both priest of love and spokesman of the natural order, (d) the use of the Seven Deadly Sins, and (e) the great array of stories that are built around them, the Confessio Amantis began to take its shape.

The structure of the poem is elaborate in its details, and as we shall see, it did not keep to the geometric pattern Gower had originally planned; but before discussing this aspect further, we would do well to consult the skeleton-outline of the poem which follows. In this outline, no attempt has been made to indicate the contents of the various stories which illustrate the deadly sins in the doctrine of love; for an analysis of that kind the reader may consult Macaulay.³ Here our purpose is simply to note the various divisions and
subdivisions of the poem. As will be seen, all but one of the books have, as their central theme, a particular vice, and all of these vices have various subdivisions, each illustrated by at least one tale. An attempt has also been made to indicate the more important of Gower's digressions from the deadly-sin motif. On the other hand, the shortest and most anecdotal of the exempla, which are extremely numerous, have not been included. It should be noted that while most of the longer stories exemplify the vice under discussion, a large minority present an antidote to it, and still others have scarcely any connection with the particular vice at all, at least as that vice relates to love.

Here, then, are the divisions of the *Confessio Amantis*:

**PROLOGUE**

**BOOK I**

1. **Pride**
   - Hypocrisy
   - stories: Mundus and Paulina
   - Trojan Horse

2. **Inobedience**
   - stories: Florent

3. **Surquidry**
   - stories: Trump of Death
   - Narcissus

4. **Avantance**
   - stories: Alboin and Rosemund

5. **Vain Glory**
   - stories: Nabugodonsor
Bk. I cont.

Antidote to Pride: Humility
stories: Three Questions

______________________________________________________________________________

BOOK II

Envy

1. Sorrow for Another's Joy
   stories: Acis and Galatea

2. Joy for Another's Grief
   stories: Travellers and the Angel

3. Detraction
   stories: Constance
   Demetrius and Perseus

4. False Semblant
   stories: Hercules and Deianira

5. Supplantation
   stories: The False Bachelor

Combination of Pride and Envy:
   stories: Pope Boniface

Antidote to Envy: Pity
   stories: Constantine and Silvester

______________________________________________________________________________

BOOK III

Wrath

1. Melancholy
   stories: Canace and Machaire

2. Cheste
   stories: four very short exempla

3. Hate
   stories: King Namphus
Bk. III cont.

4. & 5. Contek and Homicide
   stories: Diogenes and Alexander
           Pyramus and Thisbe

Warning against Wrath, Foolhaste, Homicide
   stories: Phebus and Daphne
           Athemas and Demephon
           Orestes

Digression on theme of War
   stories: Alexander and the Pirate

Antidote to War: Mercy
   stories: Telaphus and Theucer

BOOK IV

Sloth

1. Lachesce
   stories: Eneas and Dido
           Ulysses and Penelope

2. Pusillanimitg
   stories: Pygmaleon
           Iphis

3. Forgetfulness
   stories: Demophon and Phyllis

4. Negligence
   stories: Phaeton
           Icarus

5. Idleness
   stories: Rosiphelee
           Jephthah's Daughter
           Nauplus and Ulysses
           Education of Alexander
           Hercules and Achelons
Bk. IV. cont.

Digression: Expansion on theme of Labor, the antidote, used to bring in discussion of alchemy, the philosophers' stones, and language.

6. Somnolence
   stories: Ceix and Cephalus
   Prayer of Cephalus
   Argus and Mercury

7. Tristesce
   stories: Iphis and Araxarethen

BOOK V

Avarice
   stories: Midas

1. Jealousy
   stories: Vulcan and Venus

Digression: Religions of the World

2. Covetise
   stories: Virgil's Mirror
   The Two Coffers
   The King and his Steward's Wife

3. False Witness
   stories: Achilles and Deidamia
   Jason and Medea
   Phrixus and Helle

4. Usury
   stories: Echo

5. Parsimony
   stories: Babio and Croceus

6. Ingratitude
   stories: Adrian and Bardus
   Theseus and Ariadne
Bk. V. Cont.

7. Ravine
   stories: Tereus

8. Robbery
   stories: Neptune and Cornix
   Calistona

Expansion on theme of virginity:
   brief stories: Phirinus, Valentinian

9. Stealth
   stories: Leucothoe
   Hercules and Faunus

10. Sacrilege
    stories: Lucius
    Parīs and Helen

Antidote: Discussion of Prodigality and Largess

BOOK VI

Gluttony

1. Drunkeness
   stories: Galba and Vitellus

2. Delicacy
   stories: Dives and Lazarus
   Nero

Digression: Sorcery
   stories: Ulysses and Telegonus
   Nectānabu

BOOK VII

Digression: The Education of Alexander

Philosophy

Theoric (chiefly a discussion of Astronomy)

Rhetoric
Bk. VII cont.

Practice (chiefly a discussion of Policy)

stories: King and the Three Answers
Julius and the Poor Knight
Antigonus and Cinichius
Diogenes and Aristippus
Roman Triumph
Maximin
Gaius Fabricius
Ligurgius
The Pagan and the Jew
Spertachus
Gideon
Salomon
Rehoboam
Tarquin
Virginia
plus numerous very brief exempla

BOOK VIII

Laws of Marriage--chastity (Lust)

1. Incest

stories: Appollonius of Tyre

Conclusion

As this outline makes clear, Gower can hardly be accused of an excessive use of symmetry in the divisioning of his poem. Only the first three books, which deal with Pride, Envy, and Wrath in that order, can be said to adhere to a system of geometric proportion. Here Gower seems to have in mind a dependable series of divisions and subdivisions. His approach, while not based on the mystical
appeal of numerology which beset so many medieval poets, including Dante, is clearly not as haphazard, as "put-together," as, for example, the *Canterbury Tales*. He seems intent on beginning at the beginning, and continuing according to a clear-cut pattern, that is, with each general sin defined in terms of five variations on it, and each of these variations illustrated by one or two exemplary tales. As a conclusion to each book, the poet at first hit on the idea of presenting and illustrating an antidote for each general sin—humility in the case of pride, pity in the case of envy.

And yet, scarcely has Gower begun to develop this pattern before he abandons it, and the mathematical proportions of his poem begin to break down. The outlines become blurred: before the third book is completed, the poet has undertaken the first of several digressions or expansions on his theme. This one is an amplification of the theme of homicide that includes the whole subject of war, which Gower hates, no matter what the pretext for it. And the antidote, mercy, which concludes this book, is presented not as the opposite of the general sin of wrath, but as the solution of war.

In the fourth book, Gower departs from the pattern of five subdivisions that he had hitherto used and produces seven variations on the sin of sloth. Besides this, the poet has abandoned the
habit of allowing one or two, or at most, three tales to suffice as exempla of each variation. Under the sub-heading of idleness, there are seven stories and anecdotes. These are followed by a discussion of the subject of labor, which, as an antidote, would be logical enough did it not include digressions concerning alchemy, the philosophers' stones, and language.

In Book V the list of variations on the general sin, avarice, is even longer, and there is a considerable digression on the religions of the world, during which the priest of love makes the admission that the goddess whom he serves has as her domain only the baser sphere of "worldes lust and of plesance." The variations on the sin, even more than those in previous books, are often difficult to distinguish from each other in terms of definition, and one of them, sacrilege, seems to have been dragged in "by the hair": it relates to the habit that certain lovers have of whispering in church!

In contrast to Book V, the sixth book, which deals with gluttony, contains only two subdivisions of the sin, as well as an aside concerning the art of sorcery.

Up to this point, Gower has at least held to the structural principle of using one of the deadly sins as the theme of each book, but in Book VII he departs even from this. The entire section is
itself a long digression, describing various departments of human knowledge and, in the process, the duties of kingship.

The eighth and last book, which presumably should deal with the remaining sin of lust, actually considers only one minor variation of it, that of incest—the variation which, because of the single-minded emphasis that is given it rather than the fact that it is discussed, provoked the Man of Law's remark.

This analysis will suffice to indicate that Macaulay, Dodd and other critics who have pointed out the lack of mathematical proportion in Gower's poem are quite justified in doing so. The sense of symmetry is soon destroyed, the eight books do not approximate each other in length, and the subdivisions of sins are often pointless. Even more serious, a few of these subdivisions and a very considerable number of the tales have only the thinnest connections, or none at all, with the theme of love. And, of course, the various digressions that have been referred to are usually removed from the individual emotional predicament of the hero.

The answer to these perfectly reasonable objections is simply that they do not matter very much. The reader of the Confessio Amantis may become impatient, for example, with some (not all) of the facts that Gower dispenses in his long digressions or with the Confessor's habit of introducing a good enough story on the poorest
of pretexts, but he will not care that the digression itself exists or whether there are five or a dozen variations on one or another of the deadly sins. On the contrary, these irregularities, while they break up the mathematical proportions of the poem, rather add to its interest and artfulness. They are the result, on Gower's part, of a growing, a deliberate, indifference to those purely literary devices of division and subdivision to which so many medieval writers were addicted. There can be no doubt that Gower was conscious of what he was doing in his progressive departure from these methods. The proof is amply demonstrated in the Mirour de l'Omme and the Vox Clamantis; in both of these poems he himself had used the technique of departmentalization to the utmost. And, conclusively enough as far as the present point is concerned, the poet had adhered rigidly in the Mirour de l'Omme to the system of dividing every one of the Seven Deadly Sins into five subdivisions.\(^6\) One reason why he abandoned this system in the Confessio Amantis is readily apparent: the subdivisions which, in the exclusively didactic Mirour, were dealt with in a conventionally Christian fashion, could not always apply to a discussion of love. But this was not Gower's main reason. As a matter of fact, some of the subdivisions in the Mirour de l'Omme which he did not use in the Confessio Amantis would have been more appropriate than those he did use. For example, superfluity and prodigality would have been more appropriate as daughters of love-gluttony than his
unhappy choice of drunkenness (for which he mentions Tristan as an example); and under the heading of lust—a sin which, except for the subdivision of incest, he virtually ignores in his eighth book—he might, from the symmetrical point of view of his subject, have easily used all of the other four variations that are dealt with in the Mirour.

The main reason why Gower gradually discarded this type of pattern was that he had discovered there was no need for it; the structure of his poem did not have to depend on so mechanical a device; and the fact that he did depart from it, far from undermining the structure of the Confessio Amantis, accounts for what vitality it possesses. One should keep in mind the essentially static situation in which the action, such as it is, unfolds. We have to do with a colloquy, which required a method that Gower had never used before. As he progressed with it, he came to understand more and more clearly that the structure of his work depended on the presentation of this dialogue, not on any geometrical scheme.

The conversation that takes place between the Lover and the Confessor is, all things considered, a remarkably natural one. Both the principals, after all, exist at least partially on an allegorical level, and certainly the setting in which the confession takes place has no relation to the real world. Furthermore, the element of
action is altogether lacking; there is no opportunity to observe
either the Lover or the Confessor in the process of reacting to a
variety of situations. And yet the humanness of the former, which
has been previously discussed, is unmistakably present. As for the
Confessor, although he remains an allegorical type, he is no mere
mouthpiece for the objective knowledge he sets forth. Objective he
is, because, as the Lover himself remarks, he is not emotionally
engaged in the problems at hand. He is, in fact, the archetype of
the garrulous but wise pedant. The Lover is almost always plain-
tive and "to the point" in his admissions and denials of sins against
love; and in his remarks he reveals himself. The Confessor is in-
variably pontifical and digressive, willing to keep his humble listener
waiting while he displays his erudition for the benefit of the unseen
audience that, in literature and life, always seems to accompany
such figures. Behind every "Mi Sone," with which Genius responds
to the Lover's querelous questions and answers, one can hear an
almost audible "Tut, tut." Within this framework, the dialogue
moves with a definite smoothness. The Lover, helpless to help him-
self, is humbly dependent on the Confessor, and until the very end
he not only puts up with the verbosity of his mentor, but encourages
it by "setting up" the Confessor's responses:

... and over this
Of pride if ther oght elles is,
This conversational give-and-take, although it hardly allows for the kind of naturalness of language that is used in the Canterbury Tales, is at least equally as far removed from both the textbook question-and-answer technique and the disputations of the English debate-poems.

There is another reason, in addition to the characterizations involved, which helps the dialogue to progress with a minimum of artificiality: Gower's technical skill within the limits of the octosyllabic couplet has never been surpassed. A discussion of this facet of the poet's achievement belongs properly to a later chapter; here it is enough to point out that the distinctive difference that exists between the plaintive voice of the Lover and the deeper, more
pontifical voice of Genius, which the reader will quickly discern, is a matter of style as well as of content; the differing tones result not only from what is said, but from the way it is said.

The very naturalness of this dialogue must have helped to break down the symmetrical design that Gower had originally planned. Normal conversation was not conducive to balance, and on the other hand it was conducive to an expansion of the Confessor's function: digression was to be expected both of the course of ordinary speech and of the pedantic character of Genius. As long as the dialogue itself provided the necessary framework, the initial idea of a neat departmentalization of sins could be ignored. This realization was probably a conscious one on Gower's part, as the outline will attest. Once he had begun to discard the pattern of the first three books, he did not return to it. At the same time, the Confessor discourses on an increasingly ethical, rather than courtly, level, without, however, transcending the general field of secular knowledge. He becomes ambitious enough to be the spokesman for the whole natural universe--this, as we have seen, without usually contradicting his more limited representation of romantic love. Indeed, from the very earliest pages, he had freely mixed stories relating to sins against love with stories that related the same sins to their generalized meanings as sins against self, against mankind, and against
God. Thus, for example, under the single subdivision of pride called surquidry or presumption, we find the brief anecdote about Capaneus, who neglects his religion and is struck down by God (I, 1977-2009), the tale of Narcissus, whose self-love brings him to his death (2254-2366), and the story of the trumpet of death which blows for a king's brother, who is too prone to judge the weaknesses of his fellow man instead of his own (2010-2253). Love is involved in each of these situations as either a sin or a virtue: self-love, love of man, love of God--but there is not a single story about presumption that involves a romantic situation.

It is as early as these first lines, too, that the Confessor begins to speak for the natural law. The story of Narcissus serves as a fair example: after the young man has died for love of his own reflection, Gower describes his burial with some excellent lines, and then draws his own moral from one of its poignant details:

Wherof the Nimphes of the welles,
And othre that ther weren elles
Unto the wodes belongende,
The body, which was ded ligende,
For pure pite that thei have
Under the grene thei begrave.
And thanne out of his sepulture
Ther sprung anon par aventure
Of floures such a wonder syhte,
Than men ensample take myhte
Upon the dedes whiche he dede,
As thou was sene in thilke stede;
For in the wynter freysshe and faire
The floures ben, which is contraire
To kynde, and so was the folie
Which fell on his Surquiderie.

(CA, I, 2343-58; italics mine.)

In other words, even in the first book, the Confessor had never been merely the priest of courtly love. But Gower had to work out as he went along the means of giving his larger conception of Genius a freer rein. How free that meant becomes clear as the poem progresses. The Confessor, as we have seen, not only contradicts the laws of courtly love when they contradict the law of nature, but, in the fifth book, after failing to bypass a discussion of Venus, he admits, when pressed by the Lover, that she is by no means omnipotent or even virtuous (1774-1443). The Confessor's attempt to extricate himself from the narrower role of priest of love is not a fortunate device on Gower's part; it is the one point in the poem when Genius' dual meaning becomes noticeably dichotomized. It does, however, indicate that Gower was becoming more and more aware of the possibilities of the figure. In general, Gower is more adept in his handling of these larger possibilities; he lets the reader draw his own conclusions from what Genius says, not about himself, but about the world around him; the technique is in this case analogous to the one which Gower uses to reveal the Lover's age; it is simply a fact which is left to reveal itself. In the course of using this method,
Gower actually brings the entire mechanism of the Lover's shrift to a halt. As the conclusion of the sixth book, the reader learns that there will be a hiatus in the confession. The Lover himself asks for a respite, in order to learn how Alexander was taught by Aristotle. The Confessor, characteristically, is only too pleased to oblige; after a modest disclaimer that, as priest of Venus, he knows nothing of such lofty matters, he embarks on the variety of subjects which comprise the seventh book. Again it should be mentioned that from the point of view of a purely geometric evaluation, this long digression is the worst of Gower's structural blunders. The poem is supposed to be a lover's confession, after all, and this confession, with its logical use of divisions of sins and sub-sins, should constitute its structure. But, as previously noted, Gower had ceased to be interested in a mathematical construction for his poem long before he had finished it. The technique of the confessional was still the useful excuse for innumerable tales, and the theme of aged love was still the means of reaching the poem's central moral—that all roads must lead in time to God; but in a purely architectonic sense, Gower had come to depend on the dialogue itself, not as a confession only, but as a wise ranging discussion between a protagonist, who is man in his age, and that Genius which is the spirit not only of the law of love, but of all those
laws which admonish and instruct man in the knowledge of his Creator.

The digressions are the Confessor's, not Gower's; they halt the
confession, but not the dialogue.

Dramatically, the impact of this conversation is felt only at
its close; but neither the poem nor its conclusion would have been
more dramatic had the digressions been left out. If some of them
seen dull to us, the fault is that they are dull, not that they are di-
gressive. The conversation is certainly a "literary" device, and
its purpose, aside from the conclusion, is plain enough: it allows
for the maximum impression of entertainment and lore at which the
poet aimed. However, hampered as it is by this heavy freight, Gower
handles the dialogue very well. The proof of it is twofold: the Lover,
and even the Confessor; become progressively better realized as the
poem unfolds, and not once during its long course does the reader
lose the sense of the continuity of their talk. This achievement has
been, without exception, minimized by Gower's critics; yet no other
Middle English writer of allegory, much less didactic allegory, could
claim to have done as much in a work of comparable length. Form,
or structure, was never a strong point of medieval writers, par-
ticularly when they departed from the technique of straightforward
chronological narrative. In this company, Gower's poem is ex-
ceptional in terms of its sense of unity, the more so in that it
presents a static situation which in the hands of a Lydgate or a Jean de Meun would have become a series of disjointed tirades leading nowhere. Even Piers the Plowman, the only other long allegorical poem of any significance in fourteenth-century English, is a structural morass compared to the Confessio Amantis. This is not to say that the Confessio Amantis is a masterpiece of literary design in any absolute sense. But it does represent one of the very few major attempts made by English writers at the fin de siècle to break free of the stylized and often shapeless molds in which literature had been cast for centuries. In the conversation and the characterizations of the Lover and Genius, on which the structure of the Confessio Amantis relies, the artificial conventions of allegory, the mathematical divisions typical of didactic works, and the formlessness of most romance literature are all to some extent transmuted.

Despite this considerable accomplishment, no one will ever regard the structural concept of the Confessio Amantis as a landmark in the evolution of literary technique. It will not, like the Canterbury Tales and the Morte Darthur, have the designation of being described as the forbear of the novel or novella. It remains, as we began by saying, the most medieval of poems; and even its design, for all its superior form, is nevertheless as Gothic as a twelfth century cathedral; only in its total effect does it form a whole. It is
true that a few of Gower's innovations, the realistic portrait of the lover, the often natural rhythms of speech, are symptomatic of that humanistic trend in late medieval literature at which Chaucer, on every count, surpassed his learned acquaintance. But for the most part, Gower's conception amounts to a reshaping of older forms, which are not the less old because he has combined them. The poet had no single source, no prototype on which he based his organization of the Confessio Amantis, and yet not the least of the poem's attractions is the fact that it is an amalgamation of practically every genre available to the medieval writer.

Some of the structural elements which Gower used have already been mentioned: the aged Lover, Genius, the confessional dialogue, the Seven Deadly Sins against love (or nature), and the collection of stories. To these, another element should be added--those encyclopedic digressions which are not external to the structure of the poem. It would be rather arbitrary to assign each of these elements to a single literary genre, since in some cases an overlapping occurs. But granting a certain oversimplification, we may say that the figures of the Lover and Genius derive from the genre of romance allegory; the confessional dialogue from the traditional methods of scholastic, or at any rate religious, dialectic, as well as the colloquies of romance allegory; the Seven Deadly Sins from a combination of the manuals of virtues and vices and the courtly parodies of them; the
collection of tales from a whole galaxy of medieval types: redactions of classical mythology, fabliau, sermon exempla, and the Vulgate; and the digressions, of course, from the medieval encyclopedias of natural science.

To speak of romance allegory is necessarily to think of the Roman de la Rose, and there can be little doubt that the figures of the Lover and Genius are derived, however indistinctly, from that work. In the case of the Lover, the connection is particularly remote; he has grown old; for him the garden is withered, the rose cannot be plucked. He is rather the Lover as seen by Jean de Meun than by Guillaume de Lorris. Jean de Meun's unromantic view of life may even have helped to age him in the English poet's mind. In any case, although courtly heroes abounded in romance literature, there were actually only a few more or less allegorical representations of the Lover from which Gower might have chosen; and since he was very familiar with the Roman de la Rose, as the case of Genius proves, it is reasonable to conclude that the initial concept of the character came from the same source. It was not much to start with, however, and the rest—the figural realism of the Lover, his dependence on Gower's personal experience—are the products of the poet's own imagination, a fact to which he seems to attest by giving the character his own name, without, at the same time, lessening the allegorical and figural significance of his invention.
As for Genius, Gower owes the *Roman de la Rose* a far greater debt. In the previous chapter I referred to the long dialogue which takes place between Genius and Nature in the part of the *Roman* written by Jean de Meun, and there suggested that Gower's Confessor was a combination of the two characters, as well as something more—the elevation of the synthesis to the level of allegory, a level to which Genius, in the *Roman de la Rose*, had not really aspired. In the French poem, his function was simply to be one more of the mouthpieces through which Jean de Meun, who did not understand very well the method of allegorical writing, could express his views on a host of subjects. As an entity he had no existence, allegorical or otherwise. He was, in his general attitude and in the tone of his observations, merely another version of Friend, or Reason—in other words, of Jean de Meun. This treatment certainly warrants E. C. Knowlton's conclusion that, in Jean's hands, the figure which first Plato and, much later, Alan de Lille had conceived of as "the august other self and confessor of Nature, who is God's vicar," had been considerably debased. It is not possible, however, to agree entirely with his further assertion concerning Gower's version of the Confessor:

... despite his /the Confessor in the *Confessio Amantis* /solemn bearing, he was less impressive than his predecessor /in the *Roman de la Rose* /because the latter, degenerate though he was in
comparison to Alan's Genius, still betokened a noble ancestry. Gower's Genius was an every day sort of person. Gower's Genius is, as we have already described him, in many ways a rather pompous pedagogue, and in this sense he is, no doubt, an "every day sort." He lacks the grand style in his manner. Nevertheless, though the "noble ancestry" is missing, he is still a most impressive figure in his own right; as we have seen, his role as priest of nature has been in many ways enlarged. Indeed, the whole structure of the Confessio Amantis hinges on his presence: his every day tone of voice, his sensible way of looking at things, play an important part in making the long dialogue between him and the Lover seem relatively natural; and that, in its turn, is the chief reason for the sense of continuity that permeates the Confessio Amantis. Can the same be said of the figure as Jean de Meun conceived of him? The answer is an emphatic no. The French poet's habit of launching his characters, including Genius, on long, often satiric monologues, utterly disconnected from the subject at hand and unanticipated by even the thinnest of stylistic pretexts, is one of the main reasons why the second, longer part of the Roman de la Rose is a structural ruin. In the Confessio Amantis, this habit, to which Gower was himself inclined, is decidedly checked. In furthering this structural consideration, however, Gower by no means debased the concept of
Genius. The function of the priest has certainly been changed, but his significance is rather enlarged than otherwise. In the Roman de la Rose, the dialogue, if one can call it that, between Genius and Nature, and later, Genius' sermon to Love's barons, are true digressions—two among many—whether we consider them with either the "natural" or the "symmetrical" idea of structure in mind. Genius himself, although he is Nature's confessor, never really fulfills his function. Nature, it is true, kneels at his altar, but only to burst into a long monologue on subjects more or less appertaining to her rule. As for the confessor, his sole purpose in furthering the story is to perform that bit of love parody of religious ceremony which involves pardoning the barons. In a word, there is little connection between his functions in the French poem and the English one. Yet, as we have seen, Gower owed Jean de Meun much more than the Confessor's name. His debt, if we can make this distinction clear, was to the outlook of the man more than to his work. Jean de Meun's part of the Roman de la Rose was not Gower's structural source in any significant way. But the spirit of the French poet was unquestionably an inspiration to him. The two men had a very great deal in common. Both held a deeply moral attitude toward man and society; they shared a dim view of the present state of both; they believed that the justification of love was to be found in nature rather than
the courtly code which each used as a limited means rather than an end; they were both men of wide learning whose interests coincided; and both were intensely conscious that it was their mission as poets to instruct and elevate their audiences.

With all these similarities, there were nevertheless differences enough between the two: Jean de Meun was by far the more satiric of the pair, and the more reluctant to alloy his didactic purpose with a measure of entertainment; he was even less humanistic than Gower; he reserved his most lyrical passages for descriptions of nature, not subjective passions; and he was not at all an accomplished storyteller. Yet the man's ideas, as he reveals them in his poetry, were fuel to Gower's imagination: the implication, however indistinct, that Venus is the servant of Nature and that both must at the last submit to reason: the conviction, expressed with more than usual vividness, that all the social orders are corrupt and that man has strayed too far from the divine plan for his salvation; and, certainly the fondness for inserting orations of an encyclopedic as well as an ethical kind.

This was the raw material which Gower, more than a century later, found so much to his conservative taste. But it acted on him as a stimulant, not a source. He would use the ideas but not Jean de Meun's expression of them, and least of all the practically
shapeless mold in which they had been cast. If anything, Jean
de Meun's poem must have served Gower as an example of the way
he should not write his own. He does not even refer to the French
poet for the encyclopedic material that he uses.

In any case, Gower was to be a teller of tales, which Jean
de Meun had not been, and it was therefore necessary to devise
an organization into which they could be fitted. Gower's use of the
technique of dialogue was, as noted, the beginning of his solution; it
remains to be determined whether Gower was indebted to any par-
ticular source for the idea of it.

The use of dialogue in medieval literature was, of course, by
no means confined to narrative genre. Manuals of instruction,
scholastic treatises, debate poems, and love allegories all made
use of it. Diverse as this material was and familiar as some of it
undoubtedly was to Gower, it does not provide us with anything like
a model for the poet's own colloquy. With scarcely an exception,
the second party in the manuals and the scholastic writings was a "yes
man"--a mere device to keep a disquisition moving. The love al-
legories, including the Roman de la Rose, invariably involved
some action and a great deal of description that were external to the
conversation, as well as a multiplicity of characters. And as for
the debate poems, they were precisely that--debates--which the
conversation in the Confessio Amantis is not; in any case, they were generally too lively and colloquial to be to the sober Gower's liking. His poem is a true conversation, with a definite but non-argumentative give-and-take between the speakers, for all that the Confessor has most to say. Furthermore, what little physical action there is occurs only at the beginning and the end of the work. And, once it has begun, there is no break in the dialogue until the concluding lines. The Lover, the narrator of the work, speaks only to the Confessor, and during their conversation he never once describes or even mentions anything external to it, not even the time of day; nor does any third personage interrupt while the two are talking. To these details, we should add one more: one party to the talk is unhappy and in need of advice, and the other is the advisor, and, as it happens, an allegorical figure. If the student of medieval literature were asked to name the one most important and widely read work that predated Gower's, which contained more of the foregoing characteristics than any other, he would be almost bound to propose Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy. The parallel should not be drawn too closely, even supposing that it exists at all; but at the same time, there is some evidence to support a real, though vague connection between the two colloquies quite aside from the correspondences in their general outlines. Fourteenth-century England was no exception to the immense influence which the Consolation
exerted on Europe during the Middle Ages—a fact to which Chaucer's translation and Usk's obvious borrowings attest. Gower, of course, was perfectly familiar with the work and mentioned its author in both the Confessio Amantis and the Mirour de l'Ommé. We might expect him to have done so even if "Boece" had been less well known: the Consolation, with its kindly but lofty tone, its emphasis on the transitoriness of all merely human experience, its discussion of free will, its not too erudite philosophizing, was bound to delight a temperament such as Gower's.

Whatever influence Boethius may have exerted on the poet's thought, it was at most tangential. In nearly all of its essentials, the colloquy is an excellent example of form following function. We have to do with a confession, after all, and that fact alone would account for most of the characteristics of conversation mentioned above—providing always that the author was striving to give the overall design of the poem a sense of unity, which was in fact the case.

Concerning the actual use of the shrift as a literary device, the idea was Gower's own, though the introduction of Genius as a confessor was borrowed, as previously noted, from Jean de Meun.

The Confessor, the shrift, and the unconventional treatment of the Seven Deadly Sins, all involve the use of a sort of religious parody—that is, the part of the religion of love that mimicked
Christian ritual. It is interesting to reflect that no other English poet carried the parody as far, or introduced so many innovations to it, as this most moral of men. However, his purpose, in contrast to the writings of some of the continental authors, was not sacrilegious—a point so obvious that it requires no further discussion.

Of these quasi-religious elements in the Confessio Amantis, the idea of using the Seven Deadly Sins is the one which involved the least original thought on Gower's part. His source, in this case, contained all the basic material "ready-made." But this source was his own previous work, the Mirour de l'Oemme. The close parallels between the divisions of that poem and the earlier books of the Confessio Amantis have been already noted in connection with Gower's inclination to depend less on this mathematical system as the later work progressed. It should be remembered, however, that for all his improvisations on the method of subdividing which he had himself devised, he never discards the essential idea that the Seven Deadly Sins are the steps by which the confession proceeds as well as the incentives for the Confessor's many stories. As for the neat, five-part subdivisions of the sins in the Mirour de l'Oemme, where they are used in the Christian sense, the idea is as original with Gower as his later, more irregular use of them as elements in
the religion of love. Religious manuals of instruction had, of course, made use of the Seven Deadly Sins throughout the Middle Ages, as, for example, in the Somme des Vices et des Vertus, the Manuel des Pechiez, and the Miroir du Monde, not to mention the Ayenbite of Inwyt, Handlyng Synne, and the Parson's Tale. But although many of these works involved elaborate systems of dividing and re-dividing the capital sins, they did not use anything like the symmetrical design which we find in Gower's Mirour de l'Ommme. The poet's system has "no known analogue in didactic religious literature." Of his use of it, Macaulay remarked:

This is a literary work with due connexion of parts, and not a mere string of sermons. At the same time it must be said that the descriptions of vices and virtues are of such inordinate length that the effect of unity which should be produced by a well planned design is almost completely lost, and the book becomes very tiresome to read.

As it happens, mere mathematical unity has never really constituted structural unity in a literary work. It is preferable, no doubt, to no structure at all, but that is about the most that one can say for it. It should not surprise us, then, that Gower, in the less didactic inspiration of his English poem, should have abandoned the mechanical device, as we have seen that he did, in favor of a more natural one.

Gower's idea of placing a great variety of stories and instructive discourses in the mouth of the Confessor has, like the
confession itself, no literary source. The manuals of religious and moral instruction, the redactions of biblical stories, the encyclopedias, chronicles, fictional accounts of exploration, romances, adaptations and translations of classical works, bestiaries, hagiographies—the whole heterogeneous mass of medieval literature provided a rich store of stories, exempla, anecdotes, fables, and more or less factual information from which Gower could choose the material that he wished to use. And the Confessio Amantis contains much of it, gods and goddesses, knights and saints, improbable beasts and star-crossed lovers. Many of these separate elements can be traced to the Vulgate or Ovid or the encyclopedias. But there was no precedent for the way in which Gower connected them in his English poem. One may discern a real structural relationship between, say, the work of Sercambi and the Canterbury Tales, but no such analogues may be noted in the case of the Confessio Amantis. Collections of "framed" stories were a rarity in medieval literature, and of those that did exist, such as The Seven Sages, a part of the Metamorphoses, and the Arabian Nights, none had anything more in common with Gower's work than the fact that they too were subject to an overall design. The poet's use of stories as an integral part of the structure of his poem was entirely his own idea; no model can be found for it.

From the foregoing, it will be seen that Gower's debt to other
authors for various elements of his poem does not extend to an
indebtedness for the structure itself. The successes and failures
in its design are the result of his own successes and failures as a
creative poet. On these terms, the successes unquestionably out-
weigh the failures: the Confessio Amantis is one of the very few long
poems in Middle English that maintains a sense of continuity from
beginning to end, without depending on either a purely narrative for-
mat or on a sterile system of geometrical balance. The so-called
digressions, while digressive on the part of the Confessor, are not
usually digressions within the context of the poem, or at any rate,
no more so than the stories that illustrate the various sins. All is
held together by the reciprocal nature of the dialogue, and the alter-
nating tones of the Lover's and the Confessor's voices. However
static it may seem at times, the poem never ceases to be the story
of a confession and absolution. But when one has said this much,
one must still admit that the poem leaves much to be desired with
regard to its overall conception. Again, a slight distinction must
be made; the fault is not so much with the design itself, as with the
multiplicity of Gower's aims. Granting that multiplicity, the poet
does well with the design. The sense of continuity is always there,
the parts of the poem hold together; but the fact remains that the
parts do not really build toward the fine climax of the work. We have
seen that Gower had that climax in mind from the very first; the hopelessness of the Lover's passion and his withdrawal from the court of Venus have been prepared for. But what is lacking in this preparation is the sense of a dramatic progression. There is no relation between the Confessor's stories and learned disquisitions, and that timeless moment of self-knowledge that, of all the poem, most directly appeals to the modern reader. Accustomed as we are to a classical idea of art, we wish that all the poem's parts had led up to it. But to want that much is to want another poem, another poet, even another age. Gower's utilitarian attitude towards art, his conviction that, whatever else it was, its chief function was to be the instrument of moral instruction, stood immovably in the way of any expectation we might have of dramatic, as distinguished from structural continuity. Only within the scope of his personal experience does man defeat time; Hamlet is all of us, as the critics say, because he never escapes his individual experiences; so it is, in his unassuming way, with the Lover. But when man looks at the world around him, and didactically at that, he begins to mirror the age in which he lives; so it is with the Confessor and his quaint certainties. And so it is, for the most part, with Gower. The same point of view which could regard literature as the vehicle for objective moral propaganda rather than as the expression of life as it is actually experienced,
could see nothing wrong with compelling a poem to carry as much ethical freight as it could bear. Thus, in the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower cannot refrain—why should he?—from criticizing society, educating his peers in academic disciplines, rejecting the code of courtly love, detailing the duties of kingship, entertaining and edifying the reader with moral stories, explaining the function of free will, and generally justifying the ways of God to man—all this, while at the same time he presents us with the one theme, the death of love, which seems to us, but not to his own age, as though it should have been the sum of all the other parts.

This variety of purposes, so characteristic of didactic literature in the Middle Ages, explains much of the formlessness that usually besets such works. Gower solved the problem in the technical, but not the dramatic, sense of structural continuity. At that, his accomplishment is a much more considerable one than is generally supposed. Among the longer works of didactic literature which were written between the fifth and the sixteenth centuries (and of which, in their different ways, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the *Roman de la Rose*, and *Piers the Plowman* are archetypes), only the Divine Comedy achieved a perfect synthesis of didactic and dramatic aims. Of all the rest, not one ranks above the *Confessio Amantis* in the reasonableness and unity of its design.
CHAPTER V

FOOTNOTES


3 Works, II, xxix-xci.

4 Works, II, xix-xx.

5 Dodd, p. 73.

6 In the first three books of the Confessio Amantis these subdivisions correspond exactly to those in the Mirour. In later books, however, Gower not only deletes many of those that had appeared in the Mirour, but invents new ones as well.

7 "Genius as an Allegorical Figure," MLN, XXXIX (1924), 89.

8 Ibid., p. 90.


10 In the case of Jean de Meun, the procreation of children is the specific purpose that love serves; it is for this, rather than any sentimental reason, that Nature approves the attack on the castle where Bialacoil is languishing, and lends her support to the forces of the Lover. Gower scarcely implies this purpose; he values matrimony, but, childless as he seems to have been, he prefers the generalization that love is simply natural to any more particular justification of its power.

11 The framework of the Mirour is not dependent only on the manual-of-vices-and-virtues idea; it also uses the levels of the social order and a summary of scripture as the "frames" on which it builds.
The relationship between the subdivisions of sins in the *Confessio* and the *Mirour* was sufficiently close to permit Macaulay to use the former as proof of the latter's authorship. *Works*, I, xxxvi-vii.

W. J. Courthope's suggestion that the grouping of the tales in the *Confessio Amantis* around the Seven Deadly Sins "appears to be suggested by Robert of Brunne" exclusively is one of many unfounded statements that he makes about the poet. *History of English Poetry*, I (New York, 1905), 314.


*Works*, I, liii.
VI

GOWER: THE STORYTELLER

In previous chapters the terms "story," "tale," and "exemplum" have been applied arbitrarily and without definition to the narratives which Gower relates. Since this chapter is specifically concerned with these narrative units within the poem it seems advisable to begin with such a definition, one for which any of these terms may stand. Briefly, we have to do here with narrative art in its purest and, one might add, its simplest literary form. As Gower conceived it, the chief concern of the story-tale-exemplum was with the storyline itself, the unfolding of a series of connected actions. All the appendages—amplification, digression, characterization, description—which in one form are representative of medieval romance literature and in another are characteristic of the modern short story, have little to do with the tales that we shall find in the Confessio Amantis. In each of these a single action plot is the important consideration, and such elaborations as characterization and description make their appearance only to the extent that they directly affect the plot. Such stories too often lend themselves to the danger of being
merely anecdotal. Sometimes Gower escapes that danger, sometimes not. But even when he does, his stories are usually too straightforward in both plot development and theme to appeal very much to the modern temperament. So much the worse, one is tempted to say, for the modern temperament; for the genre to which the tales of Gower belong, the direct descendant of the older forms of myth and fable, has its own charm as well as its own high standards of performance; and when our poet is measured by those standards, he emerges, as will be seen, as a storyteller of the first order.

Before we proceed, however, a further remark is required here concerning the use of the term exemplum. It represents the one modification of the definition already set forth. The stories, simple and direct as they are, are meant to illustrate various morals, and in this sense they are not told for their own sake. However, the morals in the Confessio Amantis are introduced by the Confessor at the beginning and end of each story in the form of brief sermons. They may direct the course of Gower's narrative and may influence the poet's adaptations of his source material but almost never do they appear as interruptions in the narrative itself. In his use of this type of design, the poet was influenced unmistakably by the conventions of pulpit literature which were themselves descended from an older rhetorical tradition. According to this convention, the sermon and the exemplum were the two
parts of a single unit. In view of its influence on Gower, one might argue that the poet's tales should not be discussed as autonomous narratives any more than, for example, Chaucer's exemplum of the three rioters in search of Death should be discussed independently of the Pardoner's sermon which precedes it. However, in the present case enough has been said in previous chapters to indicate the context in which Gower's stories are presented and the kind of pronouncements that the Confessor makes about them. Here we will be concerned with the exempla as illustrations of the poet's narrative technique, not as illustrations of the sermons with which they are introduced by Genius. And the morals of these stories, instead of being considered as integral parts of the narratives, will be discussed in terms of their influence on Gower's adaptations of his sources.

A few words are in order here concerning the extent of what is known of the poet's sources. At present this does not amount to very much for several good reasons: from the evidence that is available it would seem that the poet was unusually eclectic in his borrowings; apparently he used not only different sources for different stories but often several sources for a single story. Also, although in most cases the original versions of his stories are known, very few attempts have been made to determine the exact
version or versions that he used. The subject is complicated by still another factor: not only was the poet very free in his methods of adaptation, but in the case of some stories he may very well have relied on nothing but his memory for the material that he used.

As one would expect, Macaulay is the chief authority for what is known of Gower's sources. But even without consulting his notes on the subject, the reader would soon conclude from a perusal of the Confessio Amantis that Ovid was the most frequent inspiration, either direct or indirect, of the poet's stories. The originals of some twenty important tales can be found in the Metamorphoses and there are a few others that are derived from the Heroides and Fasti. Equally obvious is the importance of the Bible in Gower's adaptations. Fifteen main stories have their origins in the Vulgate. Macaulay credits Benoit de Saint-Maure's Roman de Troie with being the main source of another eight major tales, with certain details in them being attributable to the Historia Trojana of Guido delle Colonne. Aside from those most frequently named works, Macaulay finds analogues, if not the sources, for many of Gower's other stories in a wide variety of medieval works: The Seven Sages of Rome, Godfrey of Viterbo's Pantheon, the Legenda Aurea, Nicholas Trivet's Anglo-Norman Chroniques, the Roman de Brut Chevalerie, the Gesta Romanorum, the Secreta Secretorum, as
well as Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and the *Book of the Duchess*. This list is by no means complete, but it will suffice to indicate the variety of possibilities that have been proposed.

A few scholars have already added to Macaulay's suggestions in particular instances. The *Works* had not been long published when George L. Hamilton proposed certain modifications concerning Gower's use of both the *Roman de Troie* and the *Secreta Secretorum*. In the former case, Hamilton attempted to link Gower's work to a hypothetical, enlarged Troy-book which, he argued, had since been lost. Macaulay had remarked on the exceptional powers of adaptation displayed by the English poet in his use of Benoit's original. Some of Gower's changes he had explained by assuming that the poet was familiar with, but less fond of, Guido delle Colonne's version of the Troy story. Hamilton, on the other hand, believed that Gower's work, like Konrad von Wurzburg's *Trojanerkrieg* and the Middle English *Seege of Troye*, was derived neither from Benoit de Sainte-Maure nor from Guido delle Colonne but from the lost version of the Troy-book mentioned above. By way of evidence he cited certain correspondences in the works of Konrad and Gower. His conclusion was that Gower had adapted his Troy stories from a work that is lost to us.

In another article, Hamilton also commented on Gower's use of the *Secreta Secretorum* which Macaulay had suggested as the
possible source of "The Pagan and the Jew" story in Book VII.

According to Hamilton's view, Gower had at hand not only a Latin text of the *Secreta Secretorum* but also the French translation by Jofroi de Watreford.

More conclusive, perhaps, than either of Hamilton's articles is one by Lewis Thorpe which accounts for the source of three of Gower's tales. In his notes, Macaulay had designated *The Seven Sages of Rome* as the source of two of these narratives, "Virgil's Mirror" and the "Tale of the King and the Steward's Wife," both in Book V. For another story, "The False Bachelor," in the second book, Macaulay had not provided a source. Thorpe has discovered not only that the story of "The False Bachelor" is to be found in a sequel to *The Seven Sages* entitled *Le Roman de Marques de Rome* but also that the same work contains the other two stories as well. It seems plausible, then, to conclude that it was *Le Roman de Marques de Rome* rather than *The Seven Sages* from which Gower borrowed all three tales.

In connection with Gower's use of Ovid, Norman Callan has written an article which, in part, concerns that subject. Using the Pyramus and Thisbe story, he compares the techniques of Gower and Chaucer in retelling the Ovidian tale. Macaulay had proposed that Gower probably recalled the story from Ovid's
Metamorphoses but without having that work before him as he wrote.

Callan, on the other hand, suggests that Gower wrote "from a recollection of Chaucer, Ovid, and perhaps the Ovide Moralise." But granting this combined recollection, Callan goes on to remark on the considerable originality that Gower displays throughout his version of the legend.

One other commentary of some importance has a bearing on the subject of Gower's sources. In her unpublished dissertation, Marie Neville has dealt with the influence of the Vulgate on the Confessio Amantis. But she also devotes much attention to apocryphal stories that do not appear in the medieval Bible but which were so widely known that it is not always possible to determine exactly where Gower found them.

All of these commentators, from Macaulay to Miss Neville, agree on one point: Gower displayed a remarkable degree of originality in the way he manipulated the material he had borrowed. Again and again Macaulay remarks in his notes on the number of changes that Gower made in what were presumably his sources. Callan describes the poet as being "as wilful as any of his contemporaries, enlarging or importing to suit his own purpose." Thorpe says that he "introduces considerable elaboration of detail, some of it consequent on his refusal to use direct speech," and "he
strengthens certain weak links in the earlier narrative." And Neville describes the poet's treatment of the Vulgate as by no means literal; he rearranges the order of events "to add freshness to the Gowerian version," and reassigns the parts spoken by the characters or emphasizes morals not stressed in the original.

On the basis of the evidence that these scholars have provided, one can conclude with reasonable certainty that Gower consistently changed the details and often the entire outline and theme of the stories which he used, for reasons which will shortly be discussed. But it is important to note here the limitations of the evidence that has thus far been produced. If we consider only the three main sources from which Gower either directly or indirectly derived his stories, that is, the Troy-book, the works of Ovid, and the Vulgate, we are obliged to conclude that we know very little about the exact texts which Gower used, particularly in the case of the first two mentioned. Benoît de Sainte-Maure's Roman de Troie had been subjected to numerous redactions, each with its own variations, before Gower ever came to it; and, as Hamilton has suggested, there is some reason to believe that the poet had knowledge of a version of the work that has been lost to us.

As for Ovid, he too underwent many translations and redactions in the course of the medieval centuries, during which his
tales were frequently moralized or allegorized. Callan remarks on the possibility that Gower was to some extent influenced by the *Ovide Moralisé* as well as by Ovid and Chaucer, but, having said as much, he does not bother to compare Gower's treatment with the earlier medieval redaction—which is very different from the classical original; instead, he confines himself to a comparison of Gower's work with that of Chaucer and Ovid. Aside from the possibility that the poet may have used a version of Ovid's work that has been lost, there has been no real effort made to compare his own adaptation with those other medieval versions of Ovidian material that have survived. In the following consideration of individual stories I shall myself not hesitate to use the Latin poet's original work as one of Gower's actual sources. However, such a comparison must be made with the rather important reservation that Gower may not have even known of a text that contained Ovid's stories completely unadulterated. Even if he did, the poet's own penchant for moralization would have probably led him also to consult one of the moralized versions of the classical work. Besides, Gower's selection of Ovid's stories from a number of his works could as easily suggest a medieval compilation of Ovidian tales as it could a thorough knowledge on the English poet's part of all of the Latin author's works.

As for Gower's dependence on the Vulgate, it seems a more
certain source than either of the others mentioned, and there is no doubt that Gower knew the Bible well and referred to it often. But it is very probable that he had heard the scriptural stories told and re-told on many occasions and not necessarily literally, as exempla within the context of written and spoken sermons. And, as previously noted, our poet depended on a wide range of pseudo-Biblical material as well. It is, then, impossible to adduce how much of Gower's talent for "freshness" in his own telling of the Biblical stories is really due to his inventiveness and how much to some non-Biblical and possibly oral source.

This problem of sources is present whenever one studies a medieval author; the foregoing is intended merely to indicate how little has been done to solve it in the case of Gower's individual tales, and how necessary it is to realize that there must always be reservations concerning the degree of the poet's unquestionable powers of adaptation. In the pages that follow I will attempt to set these reservations at the minimum by a combination of means. For one thing, the representative stories that will be discussed will be chosen from those about which there is the least doubt concerning the poet's sources. For another, the modifications that occur in Gower's versions will be explained, as far as possible, in terms of the particular morals that the stories serve to exemplify.
within the larger context of the poem. And for a third, these modifications will be identified—again, as far as possible—with certain general themes and traits that are characteristic of the author.

Before considering these individual tales, however, a few generalizations are necessary concerning the way Gower uses the many stories in his poem. It is just as well to be prepared for what we shall and shall not find in them. To begin with, the usual apology must be made to the modern reader's taste in fiction. Story telling, as Gower understood it, is a lost art; its extinction can be traced readily enough to the gradual disenchantment that has occurred with regard to the didactic and argumentative value of literature, a disenchantment of which the New Critics have become the most articulate spokesmen. Whether one agrees with all their conclusions or not, it is fair to say that the two concepts of plot and objective moral purpose which were the mainstays of earlier narrative have been superseded by an emphasis on characterization and the delineation of rational and emotional experience. This has become so much the case that even the latter-day fairy tales that children read serve a different purpose than did the märchen of yore, being designed for a therapeutic rather than a didactic effect. Inevitably, this current orientation to interior motivations and non-rational responses has not only shaped modern literature but reshaped our
understanding of the literature of the past. Milton would be dis-
mayed to know what has been done with his Satan; and no doubt
Chaucer himself would be bemused to find that undergraduates, a
few months after they have read his most famous work, retain a
clear idea of the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, the Miller, and the
Prioress, but cannot remember the tales they tell (always except-
ing The Miller’s Tale).

From all that has been said previously, the reader will read-
ily discern the point of this discussion. In Gower there is little
enough that suits the modern taste: the Lover’s sorrows, a glimpse
or two of interior experience in some of the tales, and that is about
all. But the same defense that has been applied to the general con-
cept of his English poem can also be applied to the individual stories
that it contains; to say that they are representative of a lost art is
not to say that they are without art. It is a point that both Macaulay
and W. P. Ker have made before, and with eloquence, but the
long reputation of the poet’s pedantry, his supposed stodginess, has
quite overcast his real presence as the shaper of a winter’s worth
of often marvelous stories that are both genially and purposefully
told. Even Macaulay, in describing Gower’s narrative as “a clear,
if shallow, stream, rippling pleasantly over the stones and unbroken
by either dams or cataracts” is allowing himself perhaps an un-
necessary note of condescension. The stories, the best of them at
least, are by no means altogether lacking in depth or intensity of mood or unexpected twists and turns. There are, besides, touches of irony, refinements of sentiment, and a remarkable tolerance of attitude that are not consistent with either naivete or pedantry.

The mediocrity of Gower's talent has also become a built-in part of his reputation. Moderateness would be a better word, but granting that distinction no one would deny that there is some justice to such an evaluation. Despite the largeness of his poem and the blending in it of many different elements, its author lacks the panoramic vision of Langland or the psychological depth of Chaucer. He can be profound enough in his thought at times but not often. His is the quandary of all writers who attempt to follow the middle way; in trying to obey the rule of measure, of balance, the effects they use often cancel each other out. Thus Gower's grave moral purpose is sometimes diluted by the concurrent wish to entertain, and his temperateness is occasionally at odds with the hardly temperate subject of love. The very smoothness of his style at times gives too even a tone to matter that needs more dramatic treatment. There is much that is bourgeois about Gower; he is a master at creating the effect of pathos but he does not understand tragedy; his earnest wish to keep the narrow path between the extremes of flesh and spirit, nature and reason, results
in an evenness of mood that is something less than we expect of our greatest poets.

However, when we have granted this not-always-welcome moderateness, the fact remains that at least part of the general impression of Gower's simplicity is based on his use of techniques that are themselves "simple" but which he nevertheless used with adroitness and sophistication. Nothing is less naive than the impression of naiveté consciously striven for and successfully achieved, and a fair case can be made for Gower in that respect. He chose to write the *Confessio Amantis* in octosyllabic couplets, a verse form as unassuming and poetically monotonous as one could think of; yet with it he accomplished more than any English poet has even attempted since. He was imbued with the sermonizer's conviction that a moral tale must be told simply and clearly:

> Of what matiere it schal be told,  
> A tale lyketh manyfold  
> The betre if it be spoke plein.  
> (CA, VII, 521-23.)

But he could be as intricate in his methods of simplification as others in their use of ornament. When one considers the diversity of the poet's sources and the literary habit of digressiveness so characteristic of the age (which Gower has been accused of often enough in the larger structure of his poem), the tales themselves are the more remarkable for the straightforwardness with which
they are presented. The French poets of the previous century had
developed the same smoothness of style, but rarely had it been
accompanied by an equal directness of narrative sequence; the epic
tradition had had that but without the polished and dependable crafts-
manship. In the tales in the Confessio Amantis the directness of
style and the directness of plot development are happily combined.
They are the result of a highly developed sense of selectivity on
Gower's part, not an incidental byproduct of an outlook essentially
shallow and unimaginative. In a word, the stories are not unworthy
examples of "the art that conceals art."

Enough has been said in previous chapters about the twofold
purpose of Gower's poem not to necessitate a discussion of it here.
It suffices to remark that the poet's intention to produce a work of
literary, not merely didactic, value, one that would instruct as it
entertained, must also be applied to his selection and treatment of
each separate tale. In these stories the poet's audience might take
what pleasure it would, but the author had no need to apologize, as
Chaucer did, for the absence of a moral in any of them.

Many of Gower's tales, though by no means all of them, had
been moral enough before he ever incorporated them into the design
of the Confessio Amantis. But as often as not, the moral that he
gave to them was quite different from the one they had previously
been given. Thus, in the sixth book (975-1150), the poet chooses
the Biblical tale of Dives and Lazarus as an example of the vice of
delicacy, that is, of too greatly and too exquisitely indulging the
needs of the body. In Luke, Dives is guilty simply of ignoring the
law of charity, but in Gower’s version the epicureanism of Dives
is stressed; his deliberate and selfish refusal to turn even momentar­
ily from the habit of haughty self-indulgence becomes the most signi­
18 ficant aspect of his sinfulness. In the same story, Gower has the
dogs which lick the sores of Lazarus doing so in order to "don him
ese." It is one of Gower’s favorite themes reappearing: the beasts,
in following the laws of nature, are often kinder than unnatural man.
The Bible does not provide this motive and seems to be striving for
a purely horrible effect.

In like manner, Gower subtly shades in the tale of Ahab and
Micaiah (VII, 2527-2694) with "the atmosphere of flattery in the
court of Achab"19 which at that particular point in the Confessio
Amantis was appropriate to the poet’s advice to Richard II: (The
reader will recall that much of the seventh book is a treatise on
the duties of kingship.)

However, Gower was too orthodox to attempt radical changes
in the morals of the Biblical stories he used. This restriction was
less felt and less exercised in his treatment of other sources. We
have already seen how the tale of Narcissus, which originally had been at most a warning against self-love, becomes in Gower's hands an exemplum against narcissism on the grounds that it is against nature. There are other examples of this preoccupation on Gower's part. In Book II he displays, not for the first or last time, his remarkable tolerance towards matters of sex in so far as they are natural:

What nature hath set in hir lawe
Ther mai no mannes miht withdrawe.

(CA, III, 355-56.)

He ties his theme in with the sin of wrath which is under discussion by citing the case of Tiresias who, while walking on a mountain, comes upon two snakes which "as nature hem tawhte, / Assembled were . . ." (III, 367-8.) He strikes them with a stick, and the gods, angered that he had been "to nature unkinde," transform him into a woman. It would have marred the point, of course, to go on with Ovid's tale in which Tiresias, seven years later, redeems his manhood by striking the same snakes again; and so Gower leaves the seer in his unhappy condition.

The poet could display an unexpected streak of determinism in coming to the morals of his stories—which is, perhaps, a kinder way of saying that where sins were concerned he could not always see the forest for the trees. Thus, in the story of Hercules and
Deianira (II, 2145-2312), which the Confessor narrates under the heading of false-semblant, the reader is told of how Hercules killed Nessus when the latter attempted to carry off Hercules' beloved, Deianira. The dying Nessus bequeathes to Deianira his bloody shirt against the time when Hercules may prove unfaithful to her. When that occasion arises, Deianira sends the shirt to the faithless Hercules who is burned to death when he puts it on. Gower's moral is that this tragic conclusion:

... cam al thurgh Falssemblant
That false Nessus the Geant
Made unto him and to his wif;
Wherof that he hath lost his lif,
And sche sori for everemo.

(CA, II, 203-3-07,)

A less tolerant moralist than Gower might not have drawn the same conclusion from the evidence.

In the story of Pyramus and Thisbe (III, 1331-1494), which both Gower and Chaucer made use of, the former poet, "along with incidental moralizing on the power of love, extracts from the tale a much more ethical admonition against suicide through 'folhaste.' One would have thought that the point of the story is (as in fact it seemed to Chaucer) precisely the reverse." One would have thought so, it is fair to add, if one had been reading Ovid or Chaucer. But Gower has completely revised the ending of his story in order
to make it fit his theme of the sinfulness of murder, including suicide.

In any case, the poet was too temperate a man to feel at home with
the love-death theme. Consequently, he shortens the soliloquy of
Pyramus when the unhappy lover is about to kill himself and does
not allow him to linger on until Thisbe arrives. There is much
pathos in the tale. Thisbe's own last speech is truly poignant:

'O thou which cleped art Venus,
Godesse of love, and thou, Cupide,
Which loves cause hast forto guide,
I wot now wel that ye be blinde,
Of thilke unhapp which I now finde
Only betwen my love and me.
This Piramus, which hiere I se
Bledende, what hath he deserved?
For he youre heste hath kept and served,
And was yong and I bothe also:
Helas, why do ye with ous so?
Ye sette oure herte bothe afyre,
And maden ous such thing desire
Wherof that we no skile cowthe;
Bot thus oure freisshe lusti yowthe
Withoute joie is al despended,
Which thing mai nevere ben amended:
For as of me this wol I seie,
That me is leve to forto deie
Than live after this sorghful day. '  
(CA, III, 1462-1481)

But her unhappiness, far from being tragic, is piteous, which
was the effect that Gower had in mind. The sense of life wasted,
of love misspent, was perfectly amenable to the moral which the
poet intended. There is no reason, then, to agree with Callan's
remark (which is based chiefly on Gower's handling of this story)
that the poet "has a simple mind, unencumbered with subtleties." Gower resisted the temptation to exalt romantic love, but there is no lack of subtlety in his own vision which sees the power of Venus as an amoral and ruthless force capable of being the despoiler of "freisshe lusti yowthe." Then too, in the case of this story it was Chaucer who followed the original closely, not Gower. How then is Gower simple and unsubtle? The answer brings us back to the modern taste for psychological exposition, of which there is little enough in Gower's work. The reader must fill that in for himself; the poet will not wait for it. But his predilection for narrative swiftness has earned him a reputation for naivete that more often should apply to his characters than to him. Thisbe, like so many of Gower's heroines, is a more simple creature than her counterpart in Chaucer's tale, or for that matter Iseult or Juliet. They would not have ended on such a plaintive note of questioning as

This Piramus, which hiere I se
Bledende, what hath he deserved?
(\textit{CA}, III, 1468-69.)

She is the victim, not the martyr, of the goddess; and yet her stark questioning has a profundity of its own, quite unlike the dramatic poise of other "star-crossed" heroines.

When the poet himself takes over again, what we have is direct enough, deceptively so, in its style (though note the striking
inflection in the third line of the following quote) but it is hardly shallow:

And with this word, where as he lay,
Hire love in armes sche embraseth,
Hire oghne deth and so pourchaseth
That now sche wepte and nou sche kiste,
Til ate laste, er sche it wiste,
So gret a sorwe is to hire falle,
Which overgoth hire wittes alle.

(CA, III, 1482-88.)

It is easier to agree with Callan when he says that "it is one of the incidental pleasures of the Confessio Amantis to see what surprising lessons he [Gower] can extract from the most unpromising material." And it is perfectly true that at times Gower's attempts to adapt his stories to the sins and the morals that he is dealing with do not come off too well. At such times the effect is indeed unsubtle. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is not, however, such a case, nor are most of the tales in the Confessio Amantis. Granting his objectives, Gower was usually able to adapt his sources with an exceptional and imaginative daring. His chief methods were those of all adapters—deletion, rearrangement, and/or expansion of the source.

Of the three, deletion is the technique which Gower most frequently uses. His desire to tell a story directly, without discussion, without digression, without unnecessary elaboration, amounts to a literary credo. His narrative method is so stripped
of everything unessential that it becomes at times almost a sort of shorthand. Once again, directness and simplicity invite the charge of shallowness. But Gower knew what he was about. It was incident that he delighted in. "What he sees is movement, not groups and scenes, but actions and events."25 Gower had learned his lesson from the sermon exempla, not the courtly poets; but having learned it, he transferred the method to the sphere of literary art—not simply by means of his so often good poetry but also through that sense of order and correct proportion which pervades most of the narrative material in the Confessio Amantis. Here Gower does not have to depend on a languid colloquy, as in the case of the overall structure of the work; the contrast between that more easygoing progress and the rapid-fire character of the smaller units makes for a pleasing alteration in the rhythm of the work. In the latter case the increase in tempo is never enough to make us forget the presence of the narrator, Genius, and at least part of the reason for this sense of conversational continuity in the poem is due to the economy with which the Confessor narrates the tales. We never become too lost in them; before that can happen, Genius has made his point and we are again confronted with the familiar "Mi sone." Of all the stories only the last, "Appolonius of Tyre," is overlong, and this, as Macaulay points out,26 was a hopelessly disconnected and rambling series of incidents to begin with.
Examples of Gower's use of deletion are to be found everywhere in the individual tales. The cutting off of superfluous material was the most direct means of tightening the sense of narrative continuity and of emphasizing the particular point the poet wished to make, often at the expense of other morals which the original stories had contained. An extreme example is the story of Phebus and Daphne (III, 1685-1720). In Ovid the story runs to one hundred and fifteen lines; Gower deals with it in thirty-five. The effect is not one of amputation. In Ovid's version the ultimate purpose is to explain how the laurel came to be Apollo's tree. But to the extent that moralistic material is involved at all, it has to do with the fault of arrogance or pride. This is not to say that Ovid drew such a moral in his tale, but the raw material lay ready to the moralist's hand. It is Apollo's mocking arrogance that incites Cupid to pierce him chasing after Daphne. And it is a kind of pride in that maiden which keeps her a virgin even at the cost of transformation. In other words, Gower could easily have used the story for the purpose of illustrating the sin of pride in the first book. For whatever reason, he did not. Again, under the subdivision of sloth entitled "negligence," in Book IV, Gower deals with the case of Rosiphelee, a young lady who cherishes her virginity in spite of the fact that

\[\ldots\text{sche the charge myhte bere}\]
\[\text{Of children, whiche the world forberere}\]
\[\text{Ne mai, bot if it scholde faile.}\]

\text{(CA, IV, 1495-97.)}
Daphne's story also might well have served here, but Gower passes the opportunity by. Instead, he chose to use the tale as another example of rashness, in the third book of the Confessio Amantis. It should be noted that it is at this point that the conversational structure of the poem begins altogether to supplant the geometric one. The ostensible subject that is under discussion is the antidote to wrath; the antidote, quite naturally, is patience. But from a mention of patience the Confessor moves on to a consideration of its opposite, that rashness which he had already mentioned in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. And from this he proceeds to the story of Phebus and Daphne which, as Ovid had told it, had only the same distant connection with foolhaste that foolhaste has with wrath in the Gowerian introduction to the tale. But when the English poet has reshaped the story, the unique moral that he has drawn from it seems to be the only one possible, just as, in the natural flow of associated ideas in the Confessor’s thought, the discussion of foolhaste had also seemed the natural outcome of the disquisition on wrathfulness. In the former case, the effect is almost entirely the result of skillful cutting. Gone from Gower’s version are the Ovidian descriptions of Apollo’s haughtiness, the taunts he throws at Cupid, the half-humorous pleas that he directs to Daphne. And gone also are the detailed descriptions of the maid, her genealogy,
her beauty, and her scornful disdain of suitors. What remains is the reckless and unadorned pursuit. In Gower's account the gaps made by the deletions are smoothed over where it seems necessary: thus, we learn that Phebus has been plying his unsuccessful suit even before Cupid arrives on the scene, and the latter's use of the gold and lead darts is prompted not by envy but by a wanton impulse, a desire to increase the ardor of the pursuer and the reluctance of the pursued. The English poet entirely dispenses with the means by which Daphne is turned into the laurel as well as with the Ovidian description of Apollo's love even for the tree. Also, whereas in Ovid the laurel's lasting verdure had been accounted for by Apollo's decision to wreath his head with its leaves, Gower, without discarding the particular sin against love with which he is dealing, takes the opportunity to explain the matter in a more Christian way:

That no Folhaste mihtë achieve
To gete love in such degree,
This Daphne into a lorer tre
Was torned, which is evere grene,
In tōkne, as yit it mai be sene,
That sche schal duelle a maiden stille,
And Phebus failen of his wille.

(CA, III, 1713-1720.)

In terms of this brief story of a suit too recklessly pressed, nothing could be more reasonable than the Confessor's point that "To hasten love is thing in vein" (III, 1723). Nothing could have been further, however, from the spirit of Ovid's tale.
One more example will suffice to indicate Gower's strategy of cutting down his source material to serve his own purposes. We need not leave Book III for it, or Ovid for the source, or even Phebus for the unlucky hero in order to make our point. The tale of Phebus and Cornide, or "The Talking Bird," is an interesting but not unusual case of Gower's using an economy of narrative for its own sake rather than for the purpose of accentuating a moral. In this story, the moral that Gower wanted lay ready to hand and it had been expounded upon at some length in medieval redactions of the tale. The original story in the Metamorphoses begins, properly enough, by dealing with the subject of the raven's enforced change of color due to his fault of talking too much; the Latin poet, after all, was dealing with the transformation of things. But after this prologue, the raven acts merely as a catalyst in the poem. Fully half of Ovid's tale is devoted to a supernumerary crow's account of her misfortunes, couched in the form of a warning which the raven proceeds to ignore. Most of the remaining lines deal with the anger and then the sorrow of Apollo which prompts him first to kill his mistress and then lament her death. In brief, this is the story as told by Ovid: the raven, Apollo's bird, sees his master's beloved, Coronis, committing adultery and flies off to tell the god. A crow interrupts his journey long enough to warn
him, by her own example, of what happens to chatterboxes. The raven, undaunted, carries out his intention. Apollo is so furious that his laurel crown comes awry, and in his rage he mortally wounds Coronis with an arrow. Dying, she repents, but tells him that two must die, since she is with child. Apollo tries to save her but is unsuccessful. At her funeral pyre he manages to rescue the unborn son from the mother's womb, and he gives it to Chiron to raise. Apollo blames the raven for everything, forbids him to be among the white birds, and with that the story ends.

In the *Ovide Moralisé*, Ovid's relatively brief account is enlarged to more than four times its original length and is loaded with sententious observations, but it retains all the elements of the original tale. In the moral glossing which follows the tale proper, the raven is interpreted as a representation of one of Phebus' servants. His behavior is prompted not simply by the love of gossip but by the desire to flatter his master. And the point, of course, is that

\[
\text{Nulz ne doit amer jengleour} \\
\text{Ne soi croire en losengeour.} \\
\text{Que si croit il est deceiis.} \\
\text{(253-256)}
\]

Although some slight connection has been drawn between this version of the story and Chaucer's, no connection at all can be made, in
this case, between the Ovide Moralisé and the Confessio Amantis.

Chaucer's version is humorous in its spirit, racy in its telling, and not very serious in its moralizing. He deletes the entire incident of the crow's warning and refers to the raven itself as a crow. Coronis' pregnancy and the rescue of the son from the womb are also left out. On the other hand, Chaucer emphasizes the ironic element of Phebus' belated and ill-founded conviction of his wife's innocence, and withal introduces much lively dialogue and humorous asides on the fallibility of birds, beasts, women, and men. The whole story is explained by the Manciple as one which his mother had told him as a warning to restrain his tongue.  

Compared to Chaucer's version, Gower's is a brief and sober affair, lacking in the color and gaiety that still make the other a delight to read. Nevertheless, it is exceedingly well told, and its author has admirably adapted it to suit the purposes of his own very different work. The blundering heaviness of the Ovide Moralisé is as absent from his version as from The Manciple's Tale. Also, Gower shares with Chaucer the capacity for removing what is not particularly relevant even in the original story of Ovid. There is no reference to the crow and her story, the repentance of Coronis, the matter of her pregnancy, and the rescue of her son. But more than this, the poet makes the most of his deletions by reshaping the
basic elements that remain of the story into an unornamented tale of action. Dialogue, which Gower always uses sparingly in the stories, is here dispensed with entirely. Incidents which other writers expanded and digressed from for various reasons are reduced to the essential. Thus, Coronis' faithless liaison is dealt with in a few words which tell us all we need to know:

\begin{quote}
A yong kniht tok hire acquaintance  
And hadde of hire al that he wolde.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
(CA, III, 790-91.)
\end{quote}

Again, Phæbus' chagrin when he learns that his mistress is unfaithful, his slaying of her, and his consequent regret become a matter of four lines:

\begin{quote}
And he for wrath the his swerd\textsuperscript{34} outbreide,  
With which Cornide anon he slowh,  
Bot after him was wo ynowh,  
And tok a full gret repentance.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
(CA, III, 800-3.)
\end{quote}

In the Metamorphoses, the Ovide Moralisé, and The Manciple's Tale, all of these elements are dealt with in some detail for purposes either of humor or sententiousness or irony. Gower, however, leaves the action to our imagination, preferring to press on to the matter of Phæbus' revenge on the talkative bird, and the point with which he is concerned, the wickedness of "janglyng." Yet in the process of telling this much abbreviated account, the poet had previously changed one detail in the story which explains Phæbus'
punishment of the bird better than all the elaborations of the other
versions, including Ovid's, had done; he sees to it that the bird
belongs to Coronis, not Phebus:

Bot a fals bridd, which sche hath holde
And kept in chambre of pure yowthe,
Discoevereth all that evere he cowthe.

(CA, III, 792-94.)

In the other accounts, not only does Phebus own the bird, but his
fondness for it is usually emphasized. A certain dilemma con-
cerning the justice of the bird's punishment had been implicit in the
other narratives; the bird, for all its garrulity, had been faithful
to its master. The sentence of the god is better warranted when
we understand that it had betrayed its own mistress with its gossip.
But the change of ownership has accomplished something more: it
has brought this individual tale into closer harmony with the larger
context of the poem by paralleling the situation of the bird and its
mistress with that of the Lover and the Lady. Genius is warning
the Lover not to be like the raven; and since the Lover stands in
relationship to a lady and is "possessed" by her, it is appropriate
that the raven of the story should be also, however dissimilar the
other circumstances.

The tale of Constance (II, 587-1610) is an interesting example
of Gower's narrative technique and is useful to our purposes because
for one thing, there is little doubt about the direct source which
the poet used, namely the Anglo-Norman Chronique of Nicholas Trivet, and, for another, there has been ample evidence set forth to prove that in this case Gower wrote his version before Chaucer produced the much more famous account in The Man of Law's Tale, and for a third, there is in this story sufficient argument for the position that, even when he is not at his best, our poet usually improved on the material he borrowed. For all its limitations, it is a well told story, not the "rather mediocre narrative" it has been described as being. If, as Lücke argued, Chaucer's version is the result of the influence of both Trivet and Gower, then it is fair to mention that Gower's telling of the tale, as the intermediate point between Trivet and Chaucer, is at least as much of a triumph over the former as the latter is a triumph over it. The story is a clearly told and fast-paced affair--packed with incidents which never become confusing although they are briefly dealt with. Here again we have ample evidence of the poet's habit of excluding superfluous details. He does not refer to Constance's scientific knowledge; he leaves out the conversation between the heroine and Hermyn geld which brings about the latter's conversion; he simplifies the incident involving the murder of Hermyn geld and the accusation of Constance, as well as the one in which a heathen attempts to ravish the long-suffering lady; and he omits the account of King Alle's arrival at Rome and Constance's first glimpse of him, as
well as several other minor details which are present in Trivet's Chronique. It is worth while to quote at this point a single incident as it appears in both Trivet and Gower so that the reader may note for himself the difference between the former's pedestrian prose account and the latter's redaction of it. The passage cited concerns the Souldan's negotiations to acquire Constance as his bride. The heathen merchants, to whom Constance has preached have returned to their native land. Here is Trivet's account of what happens:

Puis retournerent a lour terre. Et quant reconustrent la foi deuant lour veisines e parens Sarazins, estoient accuses al haut soudan de lour fey. E apres quil estoient amenes deuaunt lui, furent repris par les sages de lour ley qil deueyent creer en vn homme crucifie e mortel. Mes puis qil aueyent suffisaument defendo la ley Iesu Crist encontrar les paens qi ne sauoient plus countredire, comenserent de preiser las pucele Constaunce qui les quoyt convetu, de trop haute e noble sen e sapience e de graunde merueilouse beaute e gentirise e noblesse de saunc; par quelez paroles lui soudan, trop suppris del amour de la pucele (com il estoit homme de joeuene age), mansede nouel mesmes ceux Cristiens qil converti a la fei, e ousesques eus vn admiral paen oue graunt aparail et richesses e presentz a Tyberie e a sa fille, en demaundaunt la pucele en mariage oue grant promesce de pees e dalianse countre les parties de Cristiens e Sarazins. E puis que Tyberie auoit counseile sur ceste demaunde le pape Johan (de qi est auaunt dist en le quarauntisme sisme estoire) e les autrez grantz de seint eglise, e lez Romevns del senat, resp SNDY al admiral e as messagers, qe si luy soudan se voliet assenter de reneezer sez maumetz e sa mescreaunce, e rescieiuere bapteme e la lei Iesu Crist, a cest couenaunt Tyberius sas sentireit a laliaunce, mes ne pas en autre fourme. E sur ceo maunda sez lettres a lui soudan, e grantment
honura les messagers. E cist, a lour retrouner, sur toute riens preiserent la pucele a lui soudan, e la noblye, e la court, e la genti seignurie Thiberie. Et lui admiral deuaunt le soudan e deuant tot soum counseil se vowa a la fey Cristien si le soudan sassentisit.

The above is only one-half of Trivet's account. It is followed by another long paragraph detailing the number of hostages sent over to the Christians, the rights of access which the Christians are granted to the Holy Land, the departure of Constance from Rome, and the number of important personages, including many members of the clergy and a Roman senator, who accompany her. Here is Gower's version of the same transactions and events:

Whan thei ben of the feith certein, Thei gon to Barbarie ayein, And ther the Souldan for hem sente And æxeth hem to what entente Thei have here ferste feith forsake. And thei, whiche hadden undertake The rihte feith to kepe and holde, The matiere of here tale tolde With al the hole circumstance. And whan the Souldan of Constance Upon the point that thei ansuerde The beaute and the grace herde, As he which thanne was to wedde, In alle haste his cause spedde To sende for the mariage. And furthermor with good corage He seith, be so he mai hire have, That Crist, which cam this world to save, He woll believe: and this recorded, Thei ben on either side acorded, And therupon to make an ende The Souldan his hostages sende To Rome, of Princes Sons tuelle:
In comparing the two versions, the reader should keep in mind that the event which is here prepared for, that is, the marriage of Constance, never takes place. Only the machinations of the prospective mother-in-law, which are directly responsible for the beginnings of Constance's life of vicissitude and suffering (and to which Gower gives considerable attention) are important to the story that follows. The other details concerning the doomed wedding are, in the case of Trivet's account, nothing but pointless ornamentation. Granting the "historical" approach which Trivet used, there is still no question of Gower's greater narrative skill; even leaving the relative merits of the writers' respective prose and poetic techniques aside, Trivet's is a text-book story, and Gower's is the product of a disciplined and creative imagination that not only knows what to leave out entirely, but what to leave in, however sketchily. The pagan hostages, the mention of the Pope, the noble personages who accompany Constance on her journey--these are referred to by Gower in an absolute minimum of lines, and yet, in a way that is almost modern, they provide the reader with sufficient information to enable him to grasp the greatness of the match for himself.
The Constance story also serves to illustrate another very typical device of Gower's—his method of changing the sequence of events in a tale in order to ensure a smooth narrative progression, and sometimes to achieve a more dramatic effect. In Trivet's story, the incident in which Thelous, a renegade from the Christian faith, attempts to seduce Constance is followed by the account of King Alle's return from the war, his discovery of his mother's deception, and his sentencing her to death. Then the narrative returns to Constance and her rescue by the admiral of the Roman fleet. In Gower's version there is no such break. After Thelous has drowned, the story remains with Constance. Not until later in the narrative, when it is time for King Alle to reenter the tale, is there any mention of what had become of him and his wicked mother. At the point the heroine is lodged safely in Rome, living anonymously with the family of the admiral-senator, Saluste. It is the logical moment at which to leave her and turn to her husband, and Gower helps his narrative by choosing it. In doing so, he also avoids the necessity of another narrative break when Alle's mother has been disposed of; instead, the story moves on smoothly from that incident to the king's need to relieve his conscience by receiving absolution at the hands of the Pope; and from there it leads into the series of recognition scenes that follow.
There are many other examples in the *Confessio Amantis* of skillful rearrangements of events. An interesting case is Gower's treatment of the story, "King, Wine, Woman and Truth" (VII, 1783-1984). In the apocryphal 3 Esdras which was the poet's chief source, if not his only one, the order of events is as follows: while King Darius is sleeping, three of his chamberlains decide each to write a wise opinion so that the king may choose the best of them and reward its author. Darius awakens and is told of the plan and the content of the three arguments. The first of the chamberlains acclaims wine as the mightiest of earthly influences. The second argues that the king is the most powerful, and the third, Zorobabel, who is the only one named, announces that woman is stronger than either wine or king; he cites as an example the tale of Apemea, King Cyrus' concubine, who ruled his life even to the point of wearing his diadem on her head. Darius, having called a council, decides in favor of Zorobabel and rewards him by granting his requests that the Jews be given their liberty and permission to rebuild Jerusalem, and that the sacred vessels be returned to the temple.

Gower's version is quite different. Most of his changes may be explained not only by his ever-present wish to tighten the story line, but by his intention in this case to explicate both the nature
of love. We have already seen how concerned the poet was about the behavior of Richard II, and how intent he was to use the Confessio Amantis as, among other things, a guide for that young monarch. It is not surprising then that Gower's tale begins with a description of the wisdom and prudence of Darius and, more important, his dependence on the advice of wise councillors. In the English poet's version, the king takes a more active and philosophical role. The question of which is strongest, wine, woman or king, is put into the mouth of Darius as a serious question for which he seeks the answer. The opinions of the three chamberlains, which in the apocryphal account are made known at the beginning of the story, are reserved by Gower for the time when the king will choose between them—a delay which heightens the element of suspense in the story. When the disputation occurs Gower changes the order of the three arguments. In 3 Esdras the opinion that the king is mightiest holds the second, least prominent position. Gower puts it first. While minimizing the more lethal powers of rulers, he emphasizes the fact that the king is above the law:

The pouer of a king stant so
That he the lawes overpasseth.
(CA, VII, 1838-39.)

It was an opinion in keeping with the poet's conservative politics. The discussion of the power of wine which follows in a less original and less forceful statement. As for the last of the three opinions,
that which concerns woman, it is an interesting example of Gower's views on the subject. He follows 3 Esdras in having Zorobabel cite the story of Apemea, but he draws from it a powerful picture of debauched passion that is quite his own and that was vitalized no doubt by the memory of Edward III's last years:

Cirus the king tirant sche tok,
And only with hire goodly lok
Sche made him debonaire and meke,
And be the chyn and be the cheke
Sche luggeth him riht as hir liste,
That nou sche japeth, nou sche kiste,
And doth with him what evere hir liketh;
Whan that sche loureth, thanne he siketh,
And whan sche gladeth, he is glad:
And thus this king was overlad
With hire which his lemman was.

(GA, VII, 1889-1899.)

But Gower was no misogynist. If he was independent of courtly rules when he chose to be, he was equally free of that distrust of woman-kind that was so characteristic of one aspect of medieval thought.

Thus, when he has disposed of Apemea and Cirus, he proceeds to add a story that he did not find in 3 Esdras--that of Alceste, whose love saves her husband's life at the cost of her own. And he concludes the argument with one of those balanced and reasonable opinions so typical of him, in which neither God nor nature is displaced:

So mai a man be reson taste,
Hou next after the god above
The trouthe of wommen and the love,
In whom that alle grace is founde,
Is myhtiest upon this grounde
And most behovely manyfold.

(CA, VII, 1943-48.)

After this he returns to 3 Esdras for the final pronouncem ent in
which truth is announced as the mightiest of earthly powers. But
the poet turns the generalizations about truth into one more bit of
advice for the wayward and not very trustworthy king. Truth
should be "the ferste point in observance" by a ruler,

For therupon the ground is leid
Of every kinges regiment,
As thing which most convenient
Is forto sette a king in evene
Bothe in this world and ek in hevene.

(CA, VII, 1980-84.)

Gower's additions to his source material are innumerable.
Some examples of these additions have been mentioned above as a
necessary part of the discussion of his uses of deletion and re-
arrangement in the tales. A few additional examples will serve to
illustrate these original touches which occur in every story. For
example, there is the tale of Jephthah's daughter (IV, 1505-1814)
which Gower took from Judges xi. In the Confessio Amantis the
the story is used as an exemplum of the sin of negligence, that is,
of shirking the responsibilities of love. Gower seized on the early
death of Jephthah's daughter (the fulfillment of her father's rash
vow) as the pretext for building his own story around her virginal
procrastination, an element scarcely hinted at in the Biblical
account. The poet dispenses with all the details that explain Jephthah's war with the Ammonites and concentrates on the vow he makes—that if he wins he will sacrifice to God the first person that he meets on his return. Gower then ignores all the description of the battle but dwells instead on the victorious king's confrontation of his unwed daughter who has come out from the city to meet him and is, of course, the first person he sees. It is an interesting insight into the humane nature of Gower the man as well as into the artistry of Gower the poet to note what he does with the remainder of his story. The reader should bear in mind that Jephthah's daughter is the representative of a type of sin; however, her sin is of a kind that harms only the one who commits it. Perhaps for this reason, the poet ignores the opportunity to make the girl haughty and cold, the characteristics we would expect to find in one who holds her virginity proof even against the duty of marriage. Instead, he stresses the pathos of the situation, first in the description of the father's horror:

... when I cam toward this place
Ther was non gladdere man than I:
But now, mi lord, al sodeinli
Mi joie is tornéd into sorwe,
For I mi dowhter schal tomorwe
Tohewe and brenne in thi servise
To loenge of thi sacrific
Thurgh min avou, so as it is.

(CA, IV, 1543-49.)
And then in the excellent lines that describe the girl's reaction:

The Maiden, whan sche wiste of this,
And sith the sorwe hir fader made,
So as sche mai with wordes glade
Comfortheth him, and bad him holde
The covenant which he is holde
Towardes god, as he behihte.
Bot natheles hire herte aflhte
Of that sche sith hire deth comende;
And thanne unto the ground kneelende
Tofore hir fader sche is falle,
And seith, so as it is befalle
Upon this point that sche schal deie,
Of o thing ferst sche wolde him preie,
That fourty daies of respit
He wolde hir grante upon this plit,
That sche the whyle mai bewepe
Hir maidenhod, which sche to kepe
So longe hath had and noght beset;
Wherof her lusti youthe is let,
That sche no children hath forthdrawe
In Mairiage after the lawe,
So that the people is noght encress.

(CA, IV, 1550-7L)

Gower has indeed made his point. No ranting or denouncing could have achieved the same effect. In these few lines the sense of time irrecoverably lost is stated with a simple eloquence that has few counterparts in fourteenth-century English literature. It is the old theme, "Beauty passes, youth's undone," but expressed in a moral context that actually adds depth to the lyric note. In the Bible this same incident had been characterized by the maiden's dignified submission to her fate; Gower has recreated the moment in an entirely different, far more poignant mood.
The poet’s originality operates in a different way in the story of Athemas and Demephon (III, 1757-1856) where he is interested in a rational rather than an emotional means of dealing with the point he wishes to make. The general theme is contek and homicide, and Gower has drawn his story from the Roman de Troie. The speech of Nestor, which dissuades the two kings from wreaking vengeance on their faithless subjects, is for the most part Gower's own interpolation; it reflects his temperateness and hatred of war. What would all the bloodshed achieve, he has Nestor ask the hot-headed kings,

If that no people in londe were;  
... it were a wonder wierde  
To sen a king become an hierde,  
Wher no lif is bot only beste  
Under the liegence of his heste.  
(CA, III, 1818-22.)

The advice is well taken, the kings and their subjects are reconciled, and Gower has the chance to insert one of his several pointed references to a sovereign's need of good counsel:

The kinges were ayein received,  
And pes was take and wrathhe weived,  
And alithurgh conseil which was good  
Of him that reson understod.    
(CA, III, 1853-56.)

But Gower was capable of emendations far more elaborate than these. When he chose, he could so completely refurbish an old story that it became something entirely new. Such is the case with the tale
of Iphis and Araxarathen which the poet found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Briefly, the Ovidian account is as follows: a youth of common birth, Iphis by name, is unrequitedly in love with a princess, Anaxarete. All his wooing is in vain and he is finally driven to the extremity of suicide. He hangs himself from the beam above the maiden's door, but not before he has bitterly accused her of being hard of heart and has called on the gods to remember his death for love. After he has hanged himself his feet beat against the door, which flies open. The servants of the house cut down the body and deliver it to his mother, who mournfully prepares it for burial. The funeral procession moves through the streets of the city and passes near the house of the heartless Anaxarete. A god impels her to look out the window, and when he eyes light on the bier, her body stiffens and she becomes in fact a figure made of stone. Ovid cites as proof of his story the temple at Salamis, where the statue, called "The Venus Who Looks Out the Window," still stands.\(^4\)

In Ovid this story is one of the stratagems whereby Vertumnus attempts to seduce Pomona, and its moral, such as it is, is that a young maid should avoid cold-heartedness. Gower might have told the tale without changing it much under the heading of negligence. Instead he uses it in the fourth book (3515-3684) where Genius is describing despair, the last subdivision of the sin of sloth. The
poet's tolerance of human frailty has already been noted, as well as his gift for accentuating the pathos of a situation. In this story, having eschewed the original moral, he decides to win our sympathies for both protagonists, not just the hero. His first step in achieving this aim is to reverse the caste of Iphis and Araxarathen, thereby freeing the heroine from the sin of too great pride in her own social position. It is the hopeless lover who is now of noble birth and the maid who is "of lou astat." Gower implies that her reticence is due to the unbridgeable gulf that lies between their different ranks in the social scale. In loving her, Iphis "excedeth the measure/ Of resoun..."

He was with love un wys constreigned,
And sche with resoun was restreigned:
The lustes of his herte he suith,
And sche for drede scham e eschuieth,
And as sche scholde, tok good hiede
To save and kepe hir wommanhiede.
And thus the thing stod in debat
Betwen his lust and hire astat.

(CA, IV, 3529-36.)

Not only the circumstances but the mood are utterly different from Ovid's suave and amoral account. It should be noted, however, that Gower does not set himself up as a judge. He is too wise and too human to indulge in pulpit histrionics. Iphis is rash but he cannot help loving; and Araxarathen, who is submissive both to the laws of Christian morality and social custom, is not to be blamed
for refusing this too ardent suitor. The moral implications of the situation are felt throughout these lines; yet here, as almost everywhere in the *Confessio Amantis*, the impulse to condemn, which is the most repelling aspect of didactic literature, is happily absent. The poet is so careful to preserve a Christian sympathy for his hero that he prepares for his suicide by having him lose his reason:

\[
\text{. . . he through strength of love lesseth}
\text{His wit, and reason overpasseth.}
\]

*(CA, IV, 3545-46.)*

The reader is free to hope that the unhappy lover will at least not be condemned out-of-hand to hell. The poet also increases the pathos of Iphis' last soliloquy by adding details that are not found in Ovid, and by altogether recasting the speech itself. In Ovid, Iphis' last despairing cry seems to be a rather public performance. Not so in the *Confessio Amantis*, where the lover comes to the gates of Araxarathen's house at night:

\[
\text{The nyht was derk, ther schon no Mone.}
\text{. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .}
\text{And with this wofull word, 'Helas!'}
\text{Hise dedli pleintes he began}
\text{So stille that ther was noman}
\text{It herde.}
\]

*(CA, IV, 3551, 3554-57.)*

As for the speech itself, no resume can do justice to the contrast between the harsh defiance of the Ovidian original and the broken-spiritedness of Gower's more believable version. The reader may
consult the translation of Ovid and the passage from the Confessio Amantis which follow and see for himself how capably Gower has deepened the pathos of the scene without really violating the content of his source:

Ovid

. . . 'You win, Anaxarete!
I bother you no more: rejoice, and triumph,
Sing your Hosannas, crown your head with laurel.
You win, and I am glad to die. Be happy,
You of the iron heart! And still you must
Find something in my love to praise, some feature
By which I please you, some acknowledged merit.
Remember that I loved you, and my love
Endured as long as I lived, and that I suffered
A double blindness. It will be no rumor
That comes to tell you of my death: I, Iphis,
Shall be there, you will see me; feast your eyes
Upon my lifeless body. And if, O gods,
You see the deeds of mortals, remember me!
My tongue can pray no more. But tell my story
In far-off times, and what my life is losing
Add to my fame!'42

Gower

'Ha, thou mi wofull ladi diere,
Which duellest with thi fader hiere
And slepest in thi bedd at ese,
Thou wost nothing of my desese,
How thou and I be now unmete,
Ha lord, what swevene schalt thou mete,
What dremes hast thou nou on honde?
Thou slepest there, and I hier stonde.
Thogh I no deth to the deserve,
Hier schal I for thi love sterve,
Hier schal a kingse Sone dye
For love and for no felonie;
Wher thou therof have joie or sorwe,
The events that follow the death of Iphis are more directly changed by the English poet. Araxarathen, when she sees the body of her rejected lover, is overcome with self-reproach. "Sche takth upon hirself the gilt" (IV, 3609) and deliberately asks for punishment. The gods, motivated more by pity than vengeance, turn her to stone. The more technically minded among the poet's readers may wonder what has happened to the element of Christian morality. Gower has been careful to stress the rightness of the girl's refusals. Now it would seem that both the poet and the heroine had been wrong after all and that what we are confronted with is a recantation, or at any rate a dichotomy in the moral purpose of the tale. The only answer that can be made to such hair-splitting is that the dichotomy, such as it is, exists in life. The story, if anything, gains from the inconsistency. It had indeed been right for Araxarathen to resist Iphis. But now it is also right that she should suffer, having been herself the cause of suffering. The virtues of chastity and charity have been in this case irreconcilable.
The unhappiness of Araxarathen must be seen as proof of the very inflexibility of the two opposing laws. We are not asked to witness anything as modern as the breakdown of absolute laws before the spectacle of too much suffering. Rather, we are expected to see the interdependence of sin and sin. Araxarathen has become guilty of hard-heartedness because Iphis had been guilty of too strong a passion. He could not help himself, nor could she; the imperfection is a tendency toward excess, a part of the human condition, and human beings must suffer because of it. However, the perfection of the absolute moral law is not to be questioned on that account. We have to do here with a decidedly medieval way of looking at things, but within that limitation of time and place the point of view is sufficiently profound, and Gower copes with it admirably. He sums the matter up when he devises an epitaph to mark the place where Iphis lies entombed below the stone image of Araxarathen:

'He was to neysshe and sche to hard.
Be war forthi hierafterward;
Ye men and wommen bothe tuo,
Ensampleth you of that was tho. '

(CA, IV 681-84.)

The foregoing examples will suffice to indicate how adaptive our poet could be in his approach to the material he used. He usually chose his sources intelligently, with his own purposes in view. He did not hesitate to delete incidents that seemed to him irrelevant and to arrange others into a more meaningful narrative
pattern. Often enough he was motivated in these changes by the desire to emphasize a moral different from the moral he found in his source. However, there are many other occasions when his only purpose is to tighten and strengthen the structure of his own account. Even more important, the poet was capable of creating wholly original details and incidents that usually add to the meaning of his stories and that are often esthetically satisfying in their own right and without regard to any practical purpose they may serve in the context of the tales.

It is true, of course, that Gower's stories can no longer be read with the same satisfaction they afforded the poet's audience in his own time. To our more complex tastes these narratives must often seem too anecdotal, tales of incident more than of experience. It is to be hoped that the examples cited above may have indicated that the poet was quite able to describe an emotion, a state of mind, when the occasion required. But it is action that he prefers to represent most often—the pattern of events unfolding before the eye. It could almost be said that he lets each story tell itself. Genius may make pronouncements at beginning and end, but one rarely comes upon a digression, an exposition, even an unnecessary description, once a narrative has begun. With only a few exceptions, the stories are marvels of compactness; they
seem even more so when one considers how often the stories told by his contemporaries, including Chaucer, are marred by violations of the rules of narrative continuity. Gower is loyal to his story, and, as Isak Dinesen once wrote, when that is the case the silence sometimes speaks for itself. Often enough in the _Confessio Amantis_ the silence does speak. The poet has in abundance that instinctive reliance on the ability of the reader to fill in what is left unsaid--if the story is well-told--that is an inheritance from an older and more heroic kind of storytelling than that which was in fashion even in the poet's own day.
CHAPTER VI

FOOTNOTES

1 In practice, the difference between medieval tales and the short medieval romances are not always easy to distinguish, but in this respect Gower represents less of a problem than most storytellers. Few of the characteristics that are usually cited as belonging to romance literature or even the Breton lays are to be found in his narratives.

2 Cf. Dorothy Everett's comments on this subject, Essays on Middle English Literature (Oxford, 1959), pp. 169-70. It should be noted that except for his choice of design Gower is less affected even than Chaucer by the indirect influence of the rhetoricians.


4 "Gower's Use of the Enlarged Roman de Troie," PMLA, XX (1905), 179-196.

5 "Some Sources of the Seventh Book of Gower's Confessio Amantis," MP, IX (1912), 326.


7 Hamilton (op. cit., p. 14) also credits Jofroi de Watreford with providing a few details in Gower's story, "Virgil's Mirror."

8 "Thyn Owne Book: A Note on Chaucer, Gower and Ovid," RES, XXII (1946), 272.

9 "The Vulgate and Gower's Confessio Amantis," passim.


15 Works, II, xii-xiii, and Essays On Medieval Literature, pp. 120-122.

16 Works, loc. cit.

17 C. S. Lewis, op. cit., p. 135.

18 Cf. Neville's explication, op. cit., pp. 82-87.

19 Neville, p. 118.

20 And even his views of what is natural are sometimes surprising. Cf. his attitude towards incest in the tale of Canace (III, 143-336).

21 Gower tells of Hercules' dalliance with Omphale under the impression that this affair involved Iole, who was, in fact, another mistress. Cf. Works, II, 489, note. The exchange of clothes and the other details which the poet describes belong to the Omphale adventure.

22 Callan, op. cit., p. 270.

23 Callan, p. 270.


26 Works, II, xii.

28 (Humphries' translation runs to one hundred and nineteen lines.) Whether or not Gower depended directly on Ovid for this story, there can be little doubt that the extreme editing is his own work; the medieval redactions of Ovidian tales, with their moral glossing, were almost always longer than the classical original. Besides, they would hardly have used the story to point the moral of "foolhaste" in love.

29 For many examples of Gower's deletions in the case of Biblical tales, the reader should consult Miss Neville, op. cit., pp. 52-120.

30 Chaucer used this story for The Manciple's Tale, where it runs to 257 lines as compared to Gower's 67.

31 Cited from Sources and Analogues, pp. 703-9.

32 An attempt has also been made to show some connection between Chaucer's version and the story of the Merchant and his faithless wife in The Seven Sages, as well as Guillaume Mauchaut's Le Livre du Voir Dit, (cf. Sources and Analogues, pp. 716-17), but Gower's version is clearly independent of either of these works.

33 The use of the "My sone" formula in The Manciple's Tale has been considered as evidence, though not very conclusive, of Gower's precedence in the use of this story. Cf. The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, (Boston, 1957), p. 768, note.

34 In the other versions discussed here, Phebus uses a bow and arrow to dispatch Coronis.

35 Sources and Analogues, pp. 155-56. Macaulay had less convincingly argued the reverse (II, 483-84, note). Before him, E. Lücke had ably proved Gower's precedence in "Das Leben der Constanze bei Trivet, Gower, und Chaucer," Anglia, XIV (1892) 77-112 and . 149-85.)

36 Sources and Analogues, p. 155.
Les Chroniques écrites pour Marie d'Angleterre, fille de Edward I, cited from Sources and Analogues, pp. 165-66.

Miss Neville (op. cit., p. 95) has pointed out that the brief summary of this tale in the Contes Moralisés of Nicholas Bozon utilizes the same order as Gower does. However, Gower's version is so different in every other respect that it seems unlikely that this one similarity is anything but a coincidence.


Works, II, 499, note.


VII

GOWER'S POETIC CRAFTSMANSHIP

Gower could hardly have been less original in his choice of verse form for the Confessio Amantis; he had himself employed the octosyllabic verse in the Mirour de l'Omme, but even without that earlier effort he had all the precedents he could have wanted for its use. In England, Chaucer, among others, had employed it, notably in the Book of the Duchess and the House of Fame. However, it was more important as far as Gower was concerned that the meter was one of the favorite measures of the French poets, polished during its centuries of use by such writers as Chretien de Troies, Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, Guillaume Machaut, and Froissart. It was also the verse of the Ovide Moralisé and other religiously oriented poems. All things considered, it would have been surprising had Gower chosen otherwise. For all its unoriginality, his choice is one more example of his boundless but cautious good sense. The Confessio Amantis was to be his first experiment in the poetic use of English, a language still unformed and unsure of itself. As we shall see, Gower was to discipline it and force it to do his bidding to an extent that Chaucer
himself could not always surpass. But, unlike Chaucer, Gower was careful to set limits to his experiment. He was not interested in new verse forms; the old molds would do for the new subjects. In using them, the poet was, of course, dating himself on this count as on others. He was the last major English poet to work in this primarily French metrical tradition. He used the inheritance well but he had no successors worthy of the name.

In the Mirour Gower had used the octosyllabic verse in twelve-line stanzas, a common form among French writers of moral poems. The rhyme scheme he had employed was aab, aab, baa, baa, which required but two sets of rhymes for a single stanza. Both the method of rhyming and the twelve-line stanza were out of the question in the case of the Confessio Amantis where the less regular structural pattern, not to mention the requirements of the English language, made necessary a freer style. The octosyllabic couplet was the obvious solution. A few generalizations can be made about this verse form, for and against its use: it lends itself to poetry in which a sense of swift movement is an important element; the description of external events, actions, and scenes—anything, in a word, that can be apprehended by the five senses—does will in this meter. With regard to human speech, it is suitable for the needs of declamation or exhortation but it is not as suitable as a means of creating the illusion of ordinary
conversation. More troublesome than this, however, is the inadequacy of octosyllabics for the purpose of reproducing subjective or interior experience. In particular, emotions have very little room for amplification within the limits of eight syllable lines; there is not much opportunity to work in the extra nuance that is so often needed. Furthermore, the representation of a state of mind or an emotion is dependent on the tempo as well as the actual meanings of the word; the rhythm of the line must obviously evoke the mood. The octosyllabic couplet moves very swiftly, a fact which would seem to make it an undesirable form for the depiction of subjects requiring a slow pace. Here, then, is the greatest difficulty which this verse form presents: it wants always to break into a gallop, and in the hands of most writers that is precisely what it does. The meter lacks flexibility; it is almost irrepressibly allegro, whether the situation described calls for the rapid pace or not. This inflexibility, apart from its inappropriateness to the subject matter, encourages the possibility of monotony. On this point, however, a distinction should be urged between rhythm and meter. It is the rapid recurrence of the rhymes within the couplets more than the rhythm itself which makes octosyllabics particularly vulnerable to the charge of monotony. Apart from this, a slow measure used in a pentameter line can be equally monotonous if used relentlessly. Our point here is that too much has been made
of the "galloping" and monotonous quality of the octosyllabic meter.

It is true that it requires considerable skill to "rein it in" and to give variety to its rhythm, but it can be done.

The above generalizations have emphasized the negative aspects of the octosyllabic verse. With these in mind it is interesting to note how, and how successfully, Gower copes with them.

That the meter in the *Confessio Amantis* does at times produce a monotonous effect is hardly subject for debate. One example of Gower at his most mediocre will serve for a sufficient number of others:

> The proude vice of veine glorie
> Remembreth noght of purgatoire,
> His worldes joyes ben so grete,
> Him thenkth of hevene no beyete;
> This lives Pompe is al his pes:
> Yit schal he deie natheles,
> And therof thenkth he bot a lite,
> For al his lust is to delite
> In newe thinges, proude and veine,
> Als ferforth as he mai atteigne.

 *(CA, I, 2681-90.)*

The frequent end-line pauses, the unimaginativeness of the wording, the regularity of the accent and the mid-line pause, all combined with the intrinsic dullness of the thought expressed, create an enervating, colorless effect. The Confessor's pomposity, which is at other times not dull, has here crept into the poet's own voice.

There are, as has been said, a considerable number of such
passages in the *Confessio Amantis*. And yet, the really remarkable thing is that in this immense poem there are not more of them.

The fact is that Gower had an exceedingly good ear; rarely did he persist very long in writing lines like those just quoted. They must have begun to strike him as tiresome almost as quickly as they do us. Thus, for example, the above passage is followed by this one:

> I trowe, if that he myhte make  
> His body newe, he wolde take  
> A newe forme and leve his olde:  
> For what thing that he mai beholde,  
> The which to comun us is strange,  
> Anon his olde guise change  
> He wole and falle thereupon,  
> Lich unto the Camelion,  
> Which upon every sondri hewe  
> That he beholt he moste newe  
> His colour, and thus unavised  
> Fulofte time he stant desguised.  
> Mor jolif than the brid in Maii  
> He makth him evere freissh and gay,  
> And doth al his array desquise,  
> So that of him the newe guise  
> Of lusti folk alle othre take;  
> And ek he can carolles make,  
> Rondeal, balade and virelai.

*(CA, I, 2691-2709.)*

These lines are by no means Gower at his best, but they are more representative of him than the jingling ones which they succeed.

They also have the virtue of containing a number of the devices that the poet regularly uses to vary his verse. It should be noted first of all that violations of the syllabic rule or irregularities in the accent are not among them. Unlike Chaucer, by whom that
license is often freely used, Gower keeps the stress where it rightfully belongs. Nevertheless, he avoids the metronome effect. For one thing, he is liberal in his use of run-on lines; and for another, when an end-line pause does occur it is frequently on the first line of a couplet, and the rhyming line, as often as not, leads on without a pause into the next couplet. This variation alone occurs five times in the nineteen lines quoted. Again, although Gower uses the mid-line pause often enough to convey smoothness to his lines, he sometimes varies it to prevent the rhythm from "galloping." Lines 2691, 2695-97, 2701, and 2709 are examples of the caesura being shifted or ignored. In two instances, lines 2695 and 2696-97, the variation in the pause is accompanied by another technique that gives the lines a pleasing variety and that is typical of Gower, namely, his inflection of the normal syntax within a sentence (another example is to be found in line 2707). A further observation may be made concerning the poet's sense of timing. His ear for the quantity of sounds enables him to give a remarkable diversity to the rhythm of the lines. In this particular passage, of course, the movement is swift and light to match the supercilious gaiety of "Pompe," but it should be noted that the last line of those quoted, although it ends on the first line of the couplet and makes necessary a decided pause, does not leave the reader "up in the air," holding, as it were, the
unrhymed last syllable on an expectant note. Not only has the sentence come to an end but it has come to an end resoundingly with the three drawn-out nouns, "Rondeal, balade and virelai." These act as a conclusion not only to the main clause of which they are a part, but to the whole description of a vainglorious lover. Another observation that we might make here concerns the absence of "filler" phrases in Gower's poetry; he uses them, of course, but they are relatively uncommon in his lines. On the other hand, the lines quoted above do contain a near confusion of metaphors that is not typical of Gower; as a matter of fact, he is usually very sparing in his use of them. In this case, however, the poet's alternate references to the chameleon and the bird are somewhat jarring, particularly since we are not sure whether the description of the foolish suitor in lines 2704-07 is suggested by the comparison with the bird or the chameleon; it follows immediately upon the reference to the former but is more suggestive of the latter.

The above considerations refer to technical matters, some of which Gower himself may not have been aware of using, though use them he did. They are evidence, no doubt, of a conscientious craftsmanship on the poet's part; but more, they are the result of his "good ear." Within the limitations of the octosyllabics, and notwithstanding the occasions when the lines become for a short
while monotonous, Gower had a virtually complete mastery of his art. In terms of accent and syllabification there are very few bad lines. And yet—and this is the remarkable thing—the polished meter does not usually spoil the naturalness, the smoothness, with which the poet's meaning is expressed. Despite the occasional inflections, which are usually welcome and rarely difficult to untangle, the sentences and verse paragraphs seem to take shape without effort, as though they were not restricted by the verse at all. Gower's accomplishment in this respect can only be appreciated fully after one has read long passages of his work. The Confessio Amantis, one of the most correct of Middle English poems, reads with an ease and simplicity that is more often associated with some prose than with verse. The fluctuations in the rhythm are those of the sentence itself, of clauses and phrases unequal in length, unfolding in a lucid, unaffected way. Yet all the while they keep the measure of the verse. It is a considerable feat, though the very naturalness of the effect may leave some readers with the feeling that they have been cheated of the verbal fireworks that are often associated with poetic expression.

A few words should be said at this point concerning Gower's vocabulary—the raw material with which he had to work. For the information of those who may be interested, the total number of
English words in the _Confessio Amantis_ is six thousand and six, but, of these, one thousand three hundred and fifty-eight are either proper names or grammatical variants of other words to which they are related. The remaining four thousand six hundred and forty-eight words seem a very small number compared to Shakespeare's twenty-four thousand, Milton's seventeen thousand, or even Chaucer's seven thousand. However, when we consider the transitional condition of the language during the fourteenth century, and, more important, the fact that in Gower's case we have to do with a single work limited by its structure to a particular point of view, the unreasonableness of drawing too many conclusions from such comparisons becomes immediately apparent. Hundreds of English words make their first written appearance in Gower's poem. There is no reason to suppose from this that these words were not already part of the spoken English language; however, Leslie Casson has observed that, while the poet undoubtedly did appropriate large numbers of Romance words already existent in current speech, "it is probable that in some cases he analogically coined them from existing speech material, or lifted them, as they were from the French." Casson also remarks that Gower uses aureate language more frequently than Chaucer. The present writer is not convinced that this is true, but in any case the presence of such
ink-horn terms is not annoyingly obtrusive in the *Confessio Amantis*, as it is in so many of the works of the following century. It might be argued, in fact, that Gower's poem, quite aside from any consideration of its merits as literature, affords an ideal introduction to the study of Middle English as a language. Kaplan considers the poet's vocabulary more typical than that of Chaucer or Langland. Certainly it is easier to read; despite the traces of Gower's Kentish origins in the lines, the dialect is East Midland; it does not present the dialect problems that a beginning student is likely to find in the works of the Pearl Poet or Langland, nor the more extensive and sometimes exotic vocabulary that one encounters in Chaucer. Furthermore, it is characteristic of Gower to make every word count within the context of each sentence. He does not love words for their own sakes; his relatively limited use of filler phrases has already been noted, and the reader will also notice that he uses appositivees and adjectives quite sparingly. The result is that individual lines, sentences and paragraphs have the same spartan simplicity that characterizes the larger story units. Nowhere in Gower's work does this simplicity come more into play than when he is describing transitional actions, that is, actions which are not in themselves important but which must be dealt with in order to lead from one significant incident to another. A
sufficient number of examples involving this technique have been cited in the previous chapter. The important fact to note here is that in such passages every word is made to count; it would be almost impossible to describe many of these "scene-shifts" more briefly than Gower does.

The restraint which Gower imposes on the language does not, however, result in an effect unduly stark. Alliteration, for one thing, is quite frequently found in the Confessio Amantis. Fison has pointed out that in a line like

The Grete, gastli Serpent glyde
(CA, V, 5026.)

with its "contrast between the hiss of 'gastli' and the final slither in 'glyde' we have a juxtaposition of sounds that is unique before Dryden."⁶ On the other hand, there is no evidence in Gower's verse of the influence of the alliterative revival that was current at the time. Combinations such as "speke and sounen," "lief and loth," "schede and spille," "faire face," and "yaf, . . . yifte," which can be found on any page of the Confessio Amantis are usually "euphuisms" of a rather new and courtly kind though not usually original with our poet. Less frequent but still not uncommon are examples of more extensive alliteration. For example, consider the lines that conclude the transformation of Daphne into a laurel tree:
In tokne, as yit it mai be sene,
That sche schal duelle a maiden stille,
And Phebus failen of his wille.

(CA, III, 1718-20.)

In the first two lines quoted the recurring alliteration of s sounds noticeably slows the measure, appropriately enough in view of the solemn thought that is being represented. In contrast, the alliteration in the line which concludes the verse paragraph and the story reads with a swift and liquid smoothness in keeping both with the spirit of a "wind-up," a finale, and with the happy idea of Phebus' deserved failure. There are many other instances when alliteration becomes a decided element in the rhythm and timing of the lines:

And thei these old men despise,
And seiden: 'Sire, it schal be schame . . . .

( CA, VII, 4078-09.)

Sche hath hir oghne bodi feigned,
For feere as thogh sche wolde flee.

( CA, VII, 3468-69.)

And as sche loketh to and fro,
Sche sith, hir thoghte, a dragoun tho,
Whos scherdes schynen as the Sonne,
And hath his softe pas begonne.

( CA, VI, 1983-86.)

There can be no doubt that Gower used alliteration of this kind consciously, but it should be pointed out that he never halts the narrative movement of his tales for the sake of such ornamental touches. He is not tempted by the true alliterative poet's habit of thinking in
units of lines and half-lines, of building phrase on phrase, appositive on appositive, for the sake of rhetorical elaboration. If the alliteration cannot be fitted into the normal flow of a verse sentence it is not used. There is no striving, in other words, for alliterative effects; indeed, it is part of Gower's skill that even when he uses such effects the reader rarely notices them and is conscious only of the lack of monotony in the rhythm of the lines.

However, the poet was quite capable of deliberately employing rhythmic monotony, a kind of circumlocution, when the occasion required. This device usually takes the form of repetition of an anaphora or single phrase and Gower almost always uses it when he wishes to drive home the consequences of some action previously described, or to emphasize a point already made. An excellent example of the technique is to be found in the story of the punishment of Nebuchadnezzar. The proud king who has known only luxury and power is transformed into an ox:

Upon himself tho gan he loke;  
In stede of mete gras and stres,  
In stede of handes longe cles,  
In stede of man a bestes lyke  
He syh.  

(CA, I, 2992-2996.)

One other example will suffice. Genius is citing to the lover the debt which the present owes the wise men of the past:

Here lyves thanne were longe,  
Here wittes grete, here mihtes stronge,  

(CA, I, 2997-2999.)
Here hertes ful of besinesse,
Wherof the worldes redinesse
In bodi bothe and in corage
Stant evere upon his avantage.
And forto drawe into memorie
Here names bothe and here histoire,
Upon the vertu of her deede
In sondri bokes thou miht rede.

(CA, IV, 2353-62.)

The preceding remarks will serve to indicate some of the more technical aspects of Gower's poetic talent. But to explain his poetry only in such terms is to ignore the real nature of his achievement. At his best, our poet was capable of an imaginative conception of the subjects which he used without which no amount of technical facility could have given life to his verse. In his long poem there are many barren stretches when that gift of an imaginative rendering is absent. Such passages should not be confused with those rarer ones in which the verse is rough or too smoothly monotonous--though in fact the conceptually weak lines and the technically faulty ones do often coincide. What should be stressed, however, is the remarkable frequency of really excellent passages in which Gower is expressing an insight worthy of the inarguable technical powers he had at his command.

Any discussion of the evocative powers of Gower's verse, which is our subject here, must begin with the remark that in all the Confessio Amantis there is scarcely a point at which single lines
or even couplets can be used to illustrate the quality of the poet's imagination. The excellence of his poetic concepts, when they are excellent, can only be appreciated in terms of larger units. The octosyllabic couplet is itself an obstacle to the "thousand beauties" approach, but quite apart from that it was characteristic of the poet "to sacrifice an individual beauty rather than to upset the balance of the whole," as Fison has accurately pointed out. With that observation, let us look at some of the variations of mood in Gower's poetic range.

So much has previously been said about his concern with objective, exterior events, that we would do well to note how he depicts them. Consider as an example the scene in the second book which describes the herding of the mothers and children into the palace of Constantine. The emperor has "The lepre cawhte in his visage" and his doctors have prescribed a bath of children's blood:

```plaintext
Ther was ynowh to wepe and crie
Among the Modres, whan thei herde
Hou woefully this cause ferde,
Bot natheles thei moten bowe;
And thus wommen ther come ynowhe
With children soukende on the Tete.
Tho was ther manye teres lete,
Bot were hem lieve or were hem lothe,
The wommen and the children bothe
Into the Paleis forth be broght
With many a sory hertes thoght
Of hem whiche of here bodi-bore
The children hadde, and so forlore
```
Withinne a while scholden se.
The Modres wepe in here degre,
And many of hem aswoune falle,
The vonge babes criden alle;
This noyse aros, the lord it herde,
And liked out, and how it ferde
He sigh. . . .

(CA, II, 3222, 41.)

There is not a forced line or an elaborate image in this entire passage. The crowded scene is handled with a minimum of detail and with scarcely a rising of the poet's objective voice. He tells us what he sees; nothing could be more unpretentious. And yet the lines carry, with a dispassionate power, the sense of tumultuous movement, the pandemonium of tears and lamentations, of fainting mothers and wailing children. The rocking motion of lines 3229-30, the alliteration of "lieve . . . loth," and "bodi bore," the long, undulating central sentence, the representation of maternal love evoked first by the children nursing and then by the explicit idea of the infants as flesh of the mothers' flesh—all these details suggest, without unduly sentimentalizing, the plight of these unhappy people. From the beginning of the passage through line 3235 the tears and the "sóry hertes" are kept before us, but the real action of the lines concerns the arrival at the palace of the mothers and their children. It is only during the next three lines that we have the scene frozen, as it were, into an intensification of grief, with the whole description ending on the succinctly stated and most
telling reference to the crying of the children themselves. With
this, the emphasis on the general scene ceases; the movement of
the lines comes to a halt and then begins again in a finely balanced
line, with the perspective now focused on the king: "This noyse
aros, the lord it herde." (The line may remind the reader of a
more famous one which also reflects a transition from one perspective
to another: "This grew; I gave commands." ) Constantine's heart
is touched and he decides to forego his grisly bath. More to the
point—and always granting the logic of the tale itself—the reader
never doubts that the king must relent; Gower's account of the weep-
ing women and children has made the change-of-heart inevitable,
this, without any recourse to eye-rolling histrionics or extravagant
verbiage.

Perhaps the best claim that can be made for this simple passage
is that it is not in the least exceptional—for Gower, The Confessio
Amantis contains literally hundred of vignettes quite as good as this
one. Not all of them, however, are so darkly colored. As a matter
of fact, it is surprising to discover how often Gower depicts happy
events in his narratives. The traditional idea of the grim moralist
must here again be set aside. Often the stories end on a note of
reward rather than of punishment. In the tale of Ceix and Alceone
(IV, 2927-3123) we have such a conclusion, and the poet makes the
most of it. Alceone, advised in a dream of her husband's death by drowning, goes down to the shore the next day and sees for herself "Hire lord flietende upon the wawe." She casts herself into the sea, and this is what happens next:

This infortune of double harm  
The goddes fro the hevene above  
Behielde, and for the trowthe of love,  
Which in this worthi ladi stod,  
Thei have upon the salte flod  
Hire dreinte lord and hire also  
Fro deth to lyve torned so,  
That thei ben schapen into briddes  
Swimmende upon the wawe amiddles.  
And whan sche sih hire lord livende  
In liknesse of a bridd swimmende,  
And sche was of the same sort,  
So as sche mihte do desport,  
Upon the joie which sche hadde  
Hire wynges bothe abrod sche spradde,  
And him, so as sche mai suffise,  
Beclipte and keste in such a wise,  
As sche was whilom wont to do:  
Hire wynges for hire armes tuo  
Sche tok, and for hire lippes softe  
Hire harde bile, and so fulofte  
Sche fondeth in hire briddës forme,  
If that sche mihte hirself conforme  
To do the plesance of a wif,  
As sche dede in that other lif:  
For thogh sche hadde hir pouer lore,  
Hir will stod as it was tofore,  
And serveth him so as sche mai.  
Wherof into this ilke day  
Togedre upon the See thei won,  
Wher many a dowhter and a Sone  
Thei bringen forth of briddes kinde;  
And for men scholden take in mynde  
This Alceoun the trewe queene,  
Hire briddes yit, as it is seene,  
Of Alceoun the name bere.  

(CA, IV, 3088-3123.)
The charm of this passage speaks for itself, but it is worthwhile to point out how much of its mood is due to the curiously "boyish" literalness of Gower's imagination. He is not content to let the transformed couple simply fly off together with a few generalizations about how happily they lived for ever after, which would have been the properly "poetic" way to end the tale, and which was, in fact, the way that Ovid ended it; rather, we must see it all. This grave old man, who could dispose of a war or a seduction in two or three lines, is here not content until we have understood that even with "Hire wynges" and "Hire harde bile" Alceone is still the happy, gentle wife. It is the sort of scene which a later age is simply incapable of describing. Much of its appeal depends on its naivete.

As we have seen, Gower's descriptive power lends itself most to the depiction of actions and events; however, it should not be supposed that the detailed portrayal of persons, places and objects was beyond his poetic reach. Such descriptive passages are relatively rare in the Confessio Amantis, but when they occur they are often arresting enough. Here is the poet's free adaptation of Ovid's house of sleep, which is also part of the story of Ceix and Alceone:

Under an hell ther is a Cave,
Which of the Sonne mai nought have,
So that noman mai knowe ariht
The point betwen the dai and nyht:
Ther is no fyr, ther is so sparke,
Ther is no dore, which mai charke,
Wherof an yhe scholde unschette,
So that inward ther is no lette.
And forto speke of that withoute,
There stant no gret Tree nyh aboute
Wher on ther myhte crowe or pie
Alihte, forto clepe or crie:
Ther is no cok to crowe day,
Ne beste non which noise may
The hell, bot al aboute round
There is growende upon the ground
Popi, which berth the sed of slep,
With othre herbes suche an hep.
A stille water for the nones
Rennende upon the smale stones,
Which hihte of Lethes the rivere,
Under that hell in such manere
Ther is, which yifth gret appetit
To slepe. And thus full of delit
Slep hath his hous; and of his couche
Withinne his chambre if I schal touche,
Of hebenus that slepi Tree
The bordes al aboute be,
And for he scholde slepe softe,
Upon a fethrebed alofte
He lith with many a pilwe of doun:
The chambre is strowed up and doun
With swevenes many thousenfold.

(CA, IV, 2991-3023.)

Gower's virtuosity is well displayed here. With a fine simplicity
of language, his sentences move through the octosyllabic frames,
building image on image with a slow cadence. The chantlike but not
monotonous recurrence of the phrase "ther is," the presence of in-
numerable long vowels, the strong pauses at the beginnings of lines,
the balancing of phrases, the frequent alliteration—all of these elements
help to produce a passage worthy of being compared with the finest
descriptive poetry in Middle English literature. There is no
single unforgettable phrase, and yet the evocation of a hushed and heavy silence has been achieved.

Another passage, which Macaulay has justly praised, is a good example of Gower's descriptive powers operating on several levels simultaneously. The story is that of Jason and Medea (V, 3247-4239) and the lines quoted are part of the account of how Medea restores Jason's youth. Here Gower has indulged himself; there is an abundance of details: the setting, the action, the physical appearance of Medea, the characterization of her, and, most of all, the occult mood of the scene are vividly suggested:

Thus it befell upon a nyht,
Whan ther was noght bot ster reliht,
Sche was vanysshriht as hir liste,
That no wyht bot hirself it wiste,
And that was ate mydnyht tyde.
The wolrd was stille on every side;
With open hed and fot al bare,
Her her tosprad sche gan to fare,
Upon hir clothes gert sche was,
Al specheles and on the gras
Sche glod forth as an Addre doth:
Non otherwise sche ne goth,
Til sche cam to the freisshe flod,
And there a while sche withstod.
Thries sche tornd hire aboute,
And thries ek sche gan doun loute
And in the flod sche wette hir her,
And thries on the water ther
Sche gaspeth with a drecchinge onde,
And tho sche tok hir speche on honde.
Ferst sche began to clepe and calle
Upward unto the sterres alle,
To Wynd, to Air, to See, to lond
Sche preide, and ek hield up hir hond
To Echates, and gan to crie,
Which is godesse of Sorcerie.

(CA, V, 3957-82.)

The account of Medea's successful effort to restore Jason's youth continues for another two hundred lines. I have reproduced the best part of it, but it is all good. Gower was clearly enjoying himself with this magical concoction, and he knew how well it would suit the taste of his audience. Besides, it was his wish to prove how zealous Medea was in her love for Jason, and after the reader has accompanied her in her preparations for her husband's transformation, he is not likely to argue the matter. Everything that is needed is there: the dark night, the woman obsessed with her mission, the preparations for the "scary" enterprise. Here, as in the preceding passage quoted, the mood is hushed, but now the rhythm of the lines is fitful, restless, and the language is often harshly dissonant.

Despite his preoccupation with action, Gower was capable of expressing the interior thoughts and feelings of his heroes and heroines when the need arose. Chaucer was vastly superior to him in this respect, but for all Gower's limitations he could be expert enough at handling such material in his own way. More often than not, he chose to present an emotion or a thought by means of dialogue, that is, with the character describing his own inner state,
or else by means of movement, as in the passage just quoted. Yet, in spite of the fact that the delineation of emotion was alien to his temperament, he could "get inside" his protagonists when the occasion required. In an earlier part of the story of Jason and Medea we have several such instances. At one point, for example, the sorceress must be separated temporarily from Jason while he attends to the matter of winning the Golden Fleece. Medea is distraught:

Whan this was seid, into wepinge
Sche fell, as sche that was thurgh nome
With love, and so fer overcome,
That al hir world on him sche sette.
Bot whan sche sikh there was no lette,
That he mot medes parte hire fro,
Sche tok him in hire armes tuo,
An hundred time and gan him kisse,
And seide, 'O, al mi worldes blisse,
Mi truust, mi lust, mi lif, min hele,
To be thin helpe in this querele
I preie unto the goddes alle.'

(CA, V, 3643-45.)

Even in the few lines cited, it should be noted that only three actually describe the heroine's feelings directly. For the most part her emotions are expressed, quite ably, in terms of her movements and her speech. With regard to the reader's reaction, the effect of this technique is interesting. He is aware, of course, of the strong passion which agitates the lines, but he remains for the most part a spectator, witnessing but not participating in it. The
ability to compel the reader's identification with the poetically de-
scribed experience was one of the many aspects in which Chaucer,
not Gower, anticipated the future uses of poetry--in this case a
use to which the Romantics have irrevocably committed the art.
The technique, needless to say, was for the most part beyond our
poet's reach, and the best that can be said for him on this count
is that his more objective approach prevented an excess of senti-
mentality in those scenes of pathos which were a specialty of his.

There is, however, one exception to Gower's "objective"
approach, namely, the characterization of the Lover. This sub-
ject has been previously discussed in other connections; what
remains to be said concerns the way that interior experience is
depicted in his case as compared to the way it is presented in
the Confessor's stories. In this single instance the reader is able
to identify with the Lover's feelings rather than simply observe
and sympathize with them. Disguised as the narrator, Gower is
able to reproduce the Lover's emotional dilemma not the mani-
festations of it. After all, he has no other recourse. The Lover's
is the final voice that we hear in the Confessio Amantis; the poem
comes to us through him. This circumstance makes the difference
between the presentation of his own feelings and those of the char-
acters in the Confessor's stories. The latter are twice removed
from us, and, with both the Lover and Genius as their intermediaries, Gower has plenty of opportunity to indulge in the typically medieval practise of defining internal action in terms of external action. The poet has no such recourse in the case of the Lover himself. At the moment of his confession he cannot explain his present state by means of his behavior in the Confessor’s presence. Instead of the effects we must have the causes or nothing, and so we move, as it were, within. The result is that for the first time in medieval literature we come upon the detailed representation of a very human love as it is experienced by a very human man.

Consider the following passage, which can only be appreciated if it is quoted at length. Genius has asked the Lover if he is guilty of somnolence, and the Lover is spiritedly denying that he is:

. . . I dar wel undertake,
That whanne hir list on nyhtes wake
In chambre as to carole and daunce,
Me thenkth I mai me more avaunce,
If I mai gon upon hir hond,
Thanne if I wonne a kinges lond.
For whanne I mai hir hende beclippe,
With such gladnesse I daunce and skippe,
Me thenkth I touche noght the flor;
The Ro, which renneth on the Mor,
Is thanne noght so lyht as I:
So mow ye witten wel forthi,
That for the time slep I hate.
And whanne it falleth othergate,
So that hir like noght to daunce,
Bot on the Dees to caste chaunce
Or axe of love some demande,
Or elles that hir list comaunde
To rede and here of Troilus,
Riht as sche wolde or so or thus
I am al redi to consente.

(CA, IV, 2777-97.)

Sometimes the Lover seizes on these leisurely moments at day's end to attempt a romantic word or two; but the Lady is likely to cut him short with a reference to the lateness of the hour. He in his turn argues that it is still early--but it is an argument he usually loses. As he prepares to leave he looks at his mistress mournfully, but her "daunger" is always on guard (IV, 2798-2813):

    Bot he seith often, 'Have good day,'
    That loth is forto take his leve:
    Therfore, while I mai beleve,
    I tarie forth the nyht along,
    For it is noght on me along
    To slep that I so sone go,
    Til that I mot algate so;
    And thanne I bidde godd hire se,
    And so doun kneelende on mi kne
    I take leve, and if I schal,
    I kisse hire, and go forth withal.
    And otherwhile, if that I dore,
    Er I come fulli to the Dore,
    I torne ayein and feigne a thing,
    As thogh I hadde lost a Ring
    Or somwhat elles, for I wolde
    Kisse hire eftsones, if I scholde,
    Bot seldom is that I so spede.

(CA, IV, 2814-2831.)

However, these subterfuges only delay the inevitable; finally the unhappy Lover must return to his own home, cursing man's need of sleep (IV, 2832-35):
Thus ate la ste I go to bedde,  
And yit min herte lith to wedde  
With hire, wher as I cam fro;  
Thogh I departe, he wol noght so,  
Ther is no lock mai schette him oute,  
Him nedeth noght to gon aboute,  
That perce mai the harde wall;  
Thus is he with hire overall,  
That be hire lief, or be hire loth,  
Into hire bedd myn herte goth,  
And softly takth hire in his arm  
And fieleth hou that sche is warm,  
And wissheth that his body were  
To fiele that he fieleth there.  
And thus misejen I tormente,  
Til that the dede slep me hente:  
Bot thanne be a thousand score  
Welmore than I was tofore  
I am tormented in mi slep,  
Bot that I dreme is noght of schep;  
For I ne thenke noght on wulle,  
Bot I am drecched to the fulle  
Of love, that I have to kepe,  
That nou I lawhe and nou I wepe,  
And nou I lese and nou I winne,  
And nou I ende and nou beginne.  
And otherwhile I dreme and mete  
That I al one with hire mete  
And that Danger is left behinde.

(CA, IV, 2875-2903.)

Certainly there is not much high romance in the Lover's passion,  
and the Lover himself is a rather pitiful, thwarted fellow. What  
really matters, however, is that we do not simply pity him; we  
know exactly how he feels. When the Confessor finally replies  
with his self-assured "Mi Sone," we are apt to think that he is  
talking to us. This reaction, as already noted, is not one that the  
characters in the tales elicit from us. Nevertheless, it should be
emphasized that Gower's technical proficiency is relatively constant, regardless of his theme or the relation of the reader to it. In terms of its stylistic excellences, the passage quoted is not at all unique. The careful selection of details which summon up a whole setting, the infrequent but intelligent use of metaphors, the shifts in timing to suit the mood (compare, for example, the tossing and turning of lines 2898-2900 with the leveling out of the lines that follow), the unpretentious eloquence of the language, and, with all these variations, the regularity and smoothness of the meter--these characteristics are typical of Gower's poetry.

Anyone who leafs through the pages of the Confessio Amantis will find, without the slightest trouble, other examples of Gower's versatility in the selection and treatment of widely differing subjects. The citations above have been meant only to suggest the range and variety of his themes and his technical accomplishment in dealing with them. However, the selection will suffice to make the point with which we are concerned here, namely, that Gower has given a truly remarkable scope to the supposedly limited octosyllabic verse form. Time after time he has overcome the limitations that are customarily associated with its use--and this without ever much violating the rules of meter and accent. Human speech, which is exceedingly difficult to reproduce in octosyllabic
lines, becomes, in Gower's hands, quite as natural and unaffected as we could wish. The expression of a considerable variety of moods and passions, which we would suppose the four-foot line too short to manage, comes through often enough without the least sense of being forced. And the verse measure, which lends itself to a quick and monotonous pace, is controlled by the poet to such an extent that the timing of the lines continually fluctuates, usually in accordance with the meanings which they carry. When the verse does seem monotonous, which it does frequently enough, it is more often because the subject is dull than because the verse is badly composed. The lines that we would wish to memorize are few and far between, but that fact may be taken as evidence that Gower has fulfilled his aims: it was never his intention to make the reader conscious of his skill; on the contrary, he wished to be as unobtrusive with it as possible. In this, as in every other sense, he remains true to his stories. There are no frills, no ornaments, no striking confusions in the syntax to make us pause. Yet as we read on we are conscious that the poet is saying everything he wishes to say, and saying it with the kind of restrained beauty that we associate, not with elaborations and extravagance, but with simplicity, clarity, harmony—a muted music perhaps, but conceived and performed with a skill which warrants more admiration than it has generally received.
CHAPTER VII

FOOTNOTES

1 Works, I, xliii.

2 Cf. Macaulay (Works, II, xvii-iii) on the subject of Chaucer's licences with accent and meter.

3 The figures are from Theodore Kaplan's "Gower's Vocabulary," JEGP, XXXI (1932), 395. Cf. also Works, II, xcii-cxx.


8 It is interesting to compare Gower's version with Spenser's lines in the Faerie Queen (Book I, cantos 40, 41) and Chaucer's brief passages in The Book of the Duchess (152 ff.) and The House of Fame (66 ff.).

9 Works, II, xiii.

10 It is worth noting, however, that in this tale, as elsewhere in the Confessio Amantis, Gower scrupulously resists the temptation to titilate his readers with descriptions of scenes of violence. The deaths of King Creon's daughter and Medea's own children, for example, are disposed of in a couple of lines.

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CONCLUSION

The present writer is under no illusion that the current estimate of Gower is likely to be changed. However, it is to be hoped that these pages have argued with some success that their subject is worthy of more critical study than he has hitherto received. The basic premise on which the preceding chapters have been built is that Gower's literary reputation has suffered, not so much because his work is stylistically poor, but because the content of his one long English poem, which was once most interesting to his countrymen, has been outdistanced by changing values, changing fashions. This process of devaluation has been aided by a tendency on the part of most of the poet's critics to estimate the importance of the Confessio Amantis in a series of often inaccurate generalizations or to treat various elements in the poem as isolated phenomena divorced from the context of his work. Matters have not been helped by the tag of "moralist" which has clung to his reputation and which has discouraged students of fourteenth-century literature from discovering for themselves that Gower has written much more than a didactic work. In some respects the poet's situation is analogous to that of Spenser in a later age. The most famous work of both men was meant to "sugar-coat" a serious
moral purpose; in each case the formidable length and somewhat loose structure suggest the since vanished circumstances of leisure under which it was meant to be read; the subject matter of both has become dated and contains little of the element of drama; the authors were among the finest poets which their respective ages produced; and yet the achievement of each has since been overshadowed by that of a contemporary whose work was not only greater but of an entirely different order. There the analogy ends; Spenser was more an innovator of verse forms than Gower, but, perhaps more important, he lived in an age closer to ours in time and in its sympathies, and in consequence his literary reputation has endured more successfully.

It remains to summarize the reasons that make the Confessio Amantis worthy of a more careful reading than even specialists in Middle English literature usually allow it:

From a purely pragmatic standpoint, Gower's major English poem is an incomparable repository for a whole cluster of concepts and ideals that were current during the fourteenth century and with which the student of the period should be familiar. No other single work in Middle English contains such a wealth of information on what an educated and intelligent Englishman of that time believed concerning such subjects as theology, political theory, natural sciences,
courtly love, and personal ethics. With regard to some of these subjects—and in this respect only—the modern reader has something in common with the audience for whom Gower was writing the Confessio Amantis: he is not likely to have much specialized knowledge of all the topics which the poet treats; and when he views these matters through the poet's eyes he is brought into direct contact with them rather than made to see them with that hindsight which is an inevitable result of a historical treatment. This sense of immediacy is one of the great advantages of reading primary sources on any out-dated subject, but in the case of most of the subjects mentioned above such reading is often unbearably dull and, in any event, necessitates the use of a number of sources. The Confessio Amantis is hardly the last word on any of these topics, but it is virtually unique in that it affords the interested student direct access to all these types of materials in a single poem which not only synthesizes them but presents them in a form which, if not always enthralling, is at least readable.

When one considers Gower's service in this respect and one's own probable ignorance of at least some of the subjects that he treats—that is, the medieval idea of them—it seems rather unreasonable to object that his theology lacks scholastic depth or his science encyclopedic scope. The Confessio Amantis is an
introduction and, all things considered, a fascinating one, to the
day in which a man of the fourteenth century interpreted the beliefs
and theories with which he lived. Gower's concept of morality,
with its emphasis on an absolute system of ethics the only expression
of which could come through the individual, not the social organism,
is typical of an extinct way of thinking. Free will and grace, operating in the private lives of men, were the only means through which mankind could be redeemed. That they were not operating very
effectively in Gower's world is a fact reflected in the essential pes-
simism which he shared with almost all the thinkers of his time.
This "partnership" between free will and grace, a concept which subsequent history has undermined, can be studied, of course, in the
writing of the scholastics, who had much to say about it. However,
in Gower's work, particularly the Confessio Amantis, it is not so
much explicit as implicit, not so much a system as a way of seeing
reality. His attitude toward the estates of man—which in their
feudal manifestation were already outdated—is an example of this.
Although in the Confessio Amantis his main political concern is with
kingship, it is clear that whether a man be a king or a clerk or a
knight, Gower believes that the health of society depends on the
way each conducts himself in his particular sphere of influence--
not on the independent vitality and authority of temporal laws and
institutions.
Our poet's view of the natural world is equally distinct from our own and none the less fascinating for being out of date. For him man is, not surprisingly, the center of God's world. What is more interesting, perhaps, is the extraordinary emphasis which he gives the scholastic concept of the benign influence of nature. That which is natural stems from God; ergo, that which is natural is good. This is the justification if not the motivation of the remarkable degree of tolerance to be found in this moralist who is usually represented as inflexibly stern. He introduces us not only to the superbly ordered world of the medieval scientist but to its significance as well. He uses it to justify his hatred of war since war causes suffering and death; and on the other hand he uses it to defend his tolerance of that sensual passion which brings forth life.

On the subject of courtly love the poet went his own way. He was familiar with the conventions of the game but he generally chose to ignore them when they came into conflict with his religious scruples or his good sense. Furthermore, his attitude toward love was as inseparable from his idea of nature as his attitude toward political institutions was inseparable from his idea of free will. It was not simply that, as part of nature, love was good; it was also nature's way of chastening man and bringing him under the rule of reason. Hence his inspired choice of an aged lover to be the protagonist of his English poem.
All of these aspects of medieval thought are indicative of the formidable learning and intelligence which Gower possessed, and, as previously noted, they afford the modern reader an excellent introduction to the world in which the old poet lived. But his many-sided English poem has much pleasure as well as lore to offer. The tales that Gower provides in such abundance vary considerably in quality. Only a few contain the amount of dramatic characterization and psychological insight which a modern reader expects of a story, but they are almost all well organized and told with a clarity and simplicity that have their own appeal; furthermore, there are innumerable occasions on which the reader is confronted with a scene which, because of some element of authentic pathos or naive simplicity or picturesqueness, he is not likely to find in the literature of later ages. Besides the narratives themselves, there is the continuing story of the Lover which unfolds with a degree of naturalness and humanity that makes of that troubled and unheroic hero a characterization unique in medieval literature.

All of these elements—the stories, the discussions of various scientific, political, and theological subjects, and the continuing discourse between the Lover and the Confessor—are held together by a structure that is, as I have tried to indicate, a far more impressive achievement than it has been given credit for being. The
powerful note on which the *Confessio Amantis* ends--the death of love--is not, it is true, prepared for in a dramatic sense by the long books which precede it. But to complain of this is to demand of Gower's poem a purpose which was not our poet's purpose. Granting that he had many aims, the structure of the *Confessio Amantis* fulfills them very well indeed; it is not too much to say that, considered from this decidedly medieval point of view, the architectonic concept of the work takes on a rather Gothic grandeur.

As for Gower's poetic technique, the reader must finally judge for himself. However, he would do well to keep in mind what Gower intended his poetic style to be: his was not an ornamented and intricate verse; he deliberately chose as his ideal a simplicity, a clarity of expression, that subordinates the parts, the individual lines and couplets, to the effect of the whole. Of course, that very simplicity had its dangers, and Gower was not always able to overcome them. In spite of his technical skill, his superb command of meter and accent, there are many passages in the *Confessio Amantis* that justify the epitaph "monotonous." All in all, however, the really remarkable fact is that there are not more of them. Within the narrow limits of the octosyllabic couplet Gower managed to convey a wide variety of themes and moods with a language and music that usually served his subjects well--and sometimes beautifully.
No single one of the reasons cited above would be a sufficient reason for reading the *Confessio Amantis*, anymore than one of them would have been enough motivation on Gower's part for writing the poem. The great charm of the work consists of the appeal of the many separate elements of which it is composed, and of the unique and, all in all, the harmonious way in which they are combined. If one is to read the *Confessio Amantis* it should be for these reasons and on these terms.
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VITA

Donald G. Schueler was born in New York City, August 6, 1929. He attended a public elementary school and then the High School of Music and Art. After two years in the United States Marine Corps he attended the University of Georgia from which he received the B.A. in Journalism in June, 1951. For some years he traveled and worked in the advertising business. In 1957 he enrolled in the Graduate School in English at Louisiana State University. He received his M.A. in English in June, 1959. He is now a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy in English.
EXAMINATION AND THESIS REPORT

Candidate: Donald Gustave Schueler

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Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

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