Amoral Gower
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The research for this book began in 1996, and in the ensuing years I have incurred many debts. It is impossible for me to name everyone with whom I have discussed ideas and problems related to this project. Nevertheless, special mention must be made of Siân Echard, Ruth Evans, Simon Gaunt, Douglas Gray, Diane Purkiss, James Simpson, David Wallace, and Nicholas Watson. All of these scholars have given me advice, encouragement, and support in various ways, and I am extremely grateful to them for their efforts.

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This book is dedicated to Heike, Rufus, and Floyd, and to Hengwrt, much missed.
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A Note on the Texts

All references to Confessio Amantis are to The English Works of John Gower, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS e.s. 81, 82 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900–01; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). According to Macaulay’s system of classification, Confessio Amantis exists in three recensions. He uses Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Fairfax 3, which he labels a third recension manuscript, as his base text. Using a split page format, he also includes variant lines from the first recension of the poem. Following Macaulay, quotations from the first version of Confessio Amantis are here indicated with an asterisk.


From the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance and beyond, writing in the vernacular has been associated with daring intellectual experimentation. At around the same time as Geoffrey Chaucer began work on *The Canterbury Tales*, John Gower embarked on his own long poem in the vernacular, *Confessio Amantis* (completed 1390–93). Medieval literary scholarship has traditionally focused on the works of Chaucer, at the expense of those of his contemporary and friend, Gower. One of the main aims of this study is to make readers aware of the intellectual sophistication of Gower’s *Confessio* and to demonstrate ways in which Gower’s writing lends itself to the current critical and theoretical climate. The epithet “moral Gower” (originally coined by Chaucer) has proved sufficient to dissuade many from exploring his poetry, but Gower’s examination of language, gender, and sexuality, as well as the questions raised by his poetry about the ethics of reading and writing, are still relevant today. While, in an era that celebrates literary “subversion,” Gower’s reputation as both morally and politically conservative may seem off-putting, it is crucial that we acknowledge that in overtly criticizing as well as describing current affairs, Gower intervenes in politics in a way Chaucer did not. Although Gower is not overtly opposed to either the traditional social hierarchy or the monarchy, his text often challenges the readers’ ethical and political expectations. While ostensibly concerned with the promotion of morality at the levels of both macrocosm (of society) and microcosm (of the individual), Gower’s *Confessio* betrays a fascination with loss of control, abuse of power, and the dangers of knowledge gone astray.

To begin, I should explain and justify the title of the book: *Amoral Gower*. Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* has often been read as a poem that attempts to reach a loftily abstract and ethical view of the sinful (or in Gower’s own terms, divided) human condition. I would not dispute the claim that *Confessio Amantis* is profoundly concerned with the related issues of good government and personal conduct (indeed, according to
medieval classifications, poetry was a branch of ethics). Yet while it may initially seem unreasonable to suggest that Gower, or his poetry, rejects or even sidesteps ethical principles, I argue that the tensions, contradictions, and silences in Gower’s text expose the limitations of the ethical structures available to him and open up his text to multiple interpretations. A central argument of this study is that the poem destabilizes accepted categories of gender and sex, and that this has a profound impact on Gower’s treatment of ethics and politics, as well as language and rhetoric, and knowledge and power. Elizabeth Allen suggests that Gower, following the medieval Aristotelian tradition, represents morality not in terms of a body of doctrine or commands but as a question of choice and as a process. A number of critics have taken the view that the poem teaches both its own protagonist (the lover, Amans) and its audience about themselves and about how to live. James Simpson, for example, believes that as Confessio progresses, we mirror Amans’s own developments and move toward an “integrated” reading. Ethics, writing, and reading certainly intersect in the poem. Medieval thinkers were aware that fiction, and especially vernacular fiction, has a transgressive potential; that texts can be read and misread. Hugh of St. Victor, for one, was conscious that readers, as they reflect upon texts, go beyond the precepts of the texts themselves. Thus texts are open to interpretation and misinterpretation, and truth becomes contingent and relative rather than universal and transcendent. Lee Patterson makes the following observation:

If medieval readers were capable of anticipating the modern taste for ambiguity, the temptation of misreading was also available to them. And as we might expect of a culture of the book, medieval misprision brought with it little but anxiety.

Yet, whereas Patterson contends that Gower, unlike other writers of his time, did not make reading “a dangerous exercise,” I am of the opposite opinion. I conclude that the poem deliberately encourages its audience to take risks in interpretation, to experiment with meaning, and to offer individualistic readings. Indeed, insofar as it does not always give satisfactory answers to the moral questions it raises, and at times obfuscates rather than clarifies, it can be seen to pursue a negative critique of ethical poetry. Gower can be described as amoral because, insofar as he leaves the reader to make her or his own decisions, or, as Allen puts it, to take
“responsibility for creating resolution—or for tolerating irresolution,” he does step outside of his own ethical system. In so doing, Gower offers his readers (medieval, modern, and postmodern) an imaginative participation in the sinful condition of humanity and an aesthetic experience of the disorder of the world.

Reading Gower’s Confessio Amantis in the twenty-first century invites self-reflection, as it must have done in the late fourteenth century and the fifteenth century. More specifically, it encourages us to consider the ethics, if not of living (it is surely too much of its time for that), then of our own reading processes. Ethical criticism has received considerable attention in recent years. Here I am not interested in ethical criticism in the sense of reading literature as moral philosophy, or even, and more accurately (remembering the medieval classification of poetry as ethics), in reading moral philosophy as literature. I am, however, interested in ethical criticism in the sense of the ethics of criticism, or the responsibilities of interpretation.

In a useful essay, Karlheinz Stierle argues that the critic or interpreter is bound by a double contract with the text and the reader. The role the critic adopts is that of mediator. For the critic, “understanding is... a way of giving presence to the text for readers who, without the interference of the interpreter, would not reach the text any more or would not reach it in all its dimensions.” Consequently, the critic must have certain qualifications:

The interpreter as a mediator must be, as it were, an inhabitant of the work, knowing it in detail and also having experienced its more remote aspects. As an interpreter he [or she] must not only know the work itself, but also its language and how it is grounded in the language of a historical moment, in its particular cultural and social reality.

In mediating the text, in building a bridge between text and reader, the critic subscribes to the notion that “interpretation is always part of an ongoing discourse... [and] a professional and institutionally bound activity which has to keep standards of reliability.” In other words, the critic is also obliged to work within established traditions and theoretical paradigms. One dimension of this must be that the interpreter assumes a certain sort of receptive and informed readership, addresses a particular and largely academic community. I would suggest that the interpreter...
as mediator has a further responsibility: to demonstrate to her or his readership why the text is worthy of study at the given moment, to forge connections between the past and present, and thus to make the text live in the here and now.

This study offers a detailed reading of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and is informed by queer and feminist theory, as well as textual criticism, linguistic and narrative theory, and historicist and psychoanalytical approaches to literature. From my own perspective, it is my sense of my role as interpreter and the responsibilities it entails that justifies my eclectic theoretical approach. In reading Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* closely, in considering it in terms of its cultural and social reality (including its textual history), I hope to make the poem more comprehensible by conveying a sense of how it might have been received by its author’s contemporaries. In drawing on feminist theory and psychoanalysis, I am able to address issues relating to the construction of gender and sexuality in the poem (albeit in terms that Gower and his contemporaries may never have considered). These are likely to be urgent concerns for my own contemporaries, for my own interpretative community. Thus I also hope to make the poem more accessible by suggesting how it can be read today. My debts to deconstruction and queer theory are more problematic and require a different sort of justification. This is because both approaches, with their shared emphases on surface effects and reading against the grain, have been dismissed not only as unhistorical and apolitical but also as irresponsible, risk-taking, amoral, even unethical. Stierle’s defense of deconstruction can be applied equally to queer theory. Deconstruction and queer theory are invaluable as interpretative strategies, or as “methodological device[s] for approaching the complex reality of the literary text in its concreteness and immanent contradictions… [for helping] resist a simplifying and commonplace form of reception.” Until relatively recently, Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* has certainly suffered from what Stierle calls “the simulacrum of stereotyped reception.” The present study, by drawing attention to the inconsistencies, ambiguities, and absences in the poem, all of which I believe to be integral to its self-critical and relativistic ethical project, attempts to break this down. Ultimately, I agree with Stierle’s conclusions that, “if interpretation has to take radical risks in order to approach the radical risk of literature and poetry, it has to be controlled and counterbalanced by that responsibility which the contract of interpretation implies.”
Lynne Pearce has written about the implicit gendered opposition of the masculine rational critic and the feminine intuitive reader, the opposition of the objective academic interpreter who keeps her or his distance and what Pearce terms the lover of the text who engages fully with it, responds personally to it. The former always takes precedence, the latter has little or no place in scholarly discourse. In the context of Gower’s Confessio Amantis, I am reminded of Simpson’s argument that within the world of the poem’s framework—the confession of a lover to his priest—the lover (Amans) is a reader, driven by the will or desire, while the priest (Genius) represents the imagination. According to Simpson, by the end of Confessio reason has replaced desire, making the integrated and ethical reading possible for both Amans and the actual reader of the poem. In my own twenty-first-century ethical reading, I have tried to reconcile the demands of reason and desire, “disinterestedness” and involvement, wisdom and seduction, by communicating the sense I have made of this poem and why it moves me. In offering a new interpretation of Confessio Amantis, then, I do not attempt to offer a final interpretation. My principal aim is to engage more readers, and thus to stimulate more interpretations.

Unlike many previous monographs on Confessio Amantis, this study does not provide a book-by-book commentary. The combined evidence of medieval literary theory and of manuscript production suggests that late medieval texts were not always designed to be read cover to cover. The (possibly authorial) Latin summaries and glosses of Confessio, whatever other functions they fulfill, serve as mnemonic aids, which help the reader to move around this encyclopedic work. Consequently, I read thematically, making my own connections between narratives, verses, and glosses that are not necessarily located in close proximity to one another, or connected by the poem’s penitential taxonomy. I also read across different levels of the narrative, moving between the frame and the exemplary stories, and across different versions, looking at both the Ricardian and the Lancastrian texts. This study neither slavishly follows the original order of Confessio nor attempts to analyze every narrative or even every book of the text. Such an undertaking would be mammoth and repetitive. What this study does do is to identify three central and interrelated concerns in Gower’s major English poem and to explore and to contextualize his treatment of them: language, sex, and politics. This detailed analysis of Gower’s Confessio will enable me to make larger points
about the representation of sex and gender at the end of the Middle Ages. It will also enable me to address issues such as the instability of England in the realm of Richard II and the status of the vernacular at the end of the fourteenth century.

Before directly addressing the treatment of language, sex, and politics in *Confessio Amantis*, I consider in the Introduction the questions of Gower’s background (especially his class and social position), of his intellectual circle and changing political affiliations, and of the relationship between the implied and actual audiences of *Confessio*. In so doing I reconsider Gower’s literary relationship with Chaucer. I go on to outline briefly the reception of *Confessio* in the fifteenth century and thereafter before considering, in the second half of the chapter, what we might term the material reality of the poem. Part I is concerned primarily with issues of language and style. The link between language, gender, and ethics was well established in the Middle Ages. Chapters 1 and 2, for example, make a connection between Gower’s writing and that of Alain de Lille, who famously argues in *De Planctu Naturae* that grammatical barbarisms detract from masculinity. According to Alain, errors in grammatical gender are associated with immorality and sodomy, and rhetorical language has the power to corrupt. This text, with which Gower was clearly familiar, had a profound impact on his writing. Chapter 1 investigates the language and gender politics implicit in *Confessio Amantis* in relation to Gower’s Latin and Anglo-Norman writings. I argue that what might be characterized as the queer gender play of *Confessio* links sexual confusion to linguistic indeterminacy and associates both with division and sin. Chapter 2 continues my exploration of Gower’s politics of language and style by focusing on the subject of rhetoric and connecting this to Gower’s own construction of his authorial role. In this chapter, my primary concern is the way in which Gower’s construction of rhetoric can be seen to be both gendered and sexualized, especially when read alongside other classical and medieval discussions of the subject. In both chapters, the immediate historical context of the poem is relevant to the discussion. The linguistic play in *Confessio* betrays the author’s anxieties about the instability of language and the communication of knowledge. One context for these anxieties is the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, another is the Oxford Translation Debate and the intense disputes that preceded it about the role of the vernacular. Equally significantly, hostile critics attributed the vices with which rhetoric was associated—insincerity, mas-
querade, effeminacy, even sodomy—to the court of Richard II. I suggest that the elision of the Ricardian Prologue may reflect Gower’s concerns about patronage and reputation.

Part II concentrates on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and personal ethics in *Confessio*. In line with current feminist theory, I see gender as central to hierarchies of power. This section is concerned with ethical self-control, or self-government, and the exercise of power over others in the field of erotic love. Chapters 3 and 4 look at some of the ways in which gender and sex distinctions are constructed and deconstructed in the text through stories of effeminacy, transgendering, transsexuality, female homosexuality, incest, and rape, and through their corresponding morals (in English and in Latin). Chapter 3 focuses initially on the frame narrative of *Confessio*—specifically the relationship between Genius and Amans—and on a series of exemplary narratives embedded within the text of *Confessio* which are centered around problems of gender confusion. This analysis reveals that although Gower does not shy away from discussing some forms of gender transgression (including female masculinity) and sexual subversion, male sodomy remains taboo throughout. I examine the meaning of Genius’s silence on this subject and relate it to prohibitions against discussing the topic found in confessional literature more generally, and to the political aspects of the poem. *Confessio* contains a surprising number of stories about incest, rape, and seduction. Indeed such stories could be said to be central to the work as a whole. Nevertheless, they are complex and often contradictory. In Chapter 4, I examine the accounts of Venus’s birth and her union with her son, alongside the Tales of Tereus, Mundus and Paulina, and Nectanabus. Here I am concerned with accountability for sexual sin and with the question of how this is gendered: while women have to take responsibility for their own actions, men are condemned for taking advantage of others. I am also concerned with the inconsistencies in the depiction of such sin: both incest and rape, it appears, can be simultaneously reprehensible and redemptive.

In Part III my main focus is the exercise of power in the field of politics. Chapter 5 takes as its starting point the apocalyptic opening of *Confessio* and the monstrous image of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue. I am principally interested here in Gower’s depictions of kingship and go on to consider Gower’s portrait of Alexander the Great and, in this context, to think about the instruction that Alexander the Great received from
Aristotle, which is related in Book VII. I link this discussion to an analysis of the Tales of Lucrece and Virginia, both of which draw clear parallels between rape and bad government. Gower condemns tyranny and argues for self-regulation and self-reform on the part of the king, but offers no challenge to the existing political structures. Chapter 6 focuses on the climax of Confessio: Book VIII and Genius’s Tale of Apollonius of Tyre. This narrative is on one level concerned with the satisfaction of “legitimate” male appetites and the frustration of appetites judged to be illegitimate or feminine, while on another it admits the possibility of an autonomous female sexuality. Gower’s version acknowledges the importance of women—as wives and as mothers—within the patriarchal household and points to the indispensability of women and femininity in ethics and politics. The tale offers criticism of the monarch in its portrayal of Apollonius, who is implicated in the crimes of incest and sodomy, and who, like Alexander and other political characters discussed in the previous chapter, misuses his knowledge and power. The chapter concludes by revisiting the narrative framework and considering the ethical and political implications of the author’s decision to merge his own authorial persona with the figures of Amans, Alexander, and ultimately Richard II himself.

The Epilogue examines some of the ways in which Gower represents himself and his literary project. Gower’s poetic persona in Confessio is notoriously divided between the serious and the playful: he is prophet, teacher, political commentator, philosophical poet, and (at the end of the poem at least) aged and unsuccessful lover. Here I argue that the disunities and internal contradictions (including the failure to prioritize lore over love) that mark the poem as a whole undercut its moral project. In the final analysis, the poem may be political, but it is not ethical, because, while it may warn against unreasonable conduct, it fails to give straightforward and coherent guidance about either how to govern or how to live one’s life. Gower’s treatment of language, sex, and politics is symptomatic of his perception of the division of the world. Gower’s Confessio is therefore less an examination of human sin than a literary and intellectual engagement with it. While on many levels appearing to stand for truth and order, the poem partakes of the world’s inevitable disorder.
Social Gower

Relatively few documents relating to Gower’s life have survived.¹ His birth is generally dated to 1330 or thereabouts. He may have been born in Yorkshire, but was brought up in Kent and West Suffolk. His social background was similar to Chaucer’s in that he was from an affluent middle-class family and connected in some way to the royal court.² Like Chaucer, he held the rank of esquier. However, unlike Chaucer, he does not seem to have been a member of the king’s household, or to have been in the employment of the government. Gower himself was most probably a lawyer by profession, and consequently he was no doubt more able than Chaucer to choose and to switch his political loyalties. Gower was also a country landowner. Records of his property transactions have come down to us, and one of these seems to have been of dubious legality, although his claim was ultimately upheld.³ In the 1370s, he became involved in the rebuilding of the Priory of St. Mary Overeys in Southwark, where he lived in his old age. In his last years Gower, whose eyesight had been declining for some considerable time, suffered a great deal of infirmity. On 23 January 1398, in other words when he was almost seventy years of age, he married Agnes Groundolf. He died ten years later between 15 August (the date of his will) and 24 October 1408 (when probate was obtained).

Gower’s literary career spanned most of the second half of his life, although he was most active between around 1374 right up until 1400, when he went blind. In this period he was writing and revising his major works in Anglo-Norman, Latin, and English, which were, in roughly