

John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* first appeared in a manuscript of 1390. The first print edition of the work was published by Caxton in 1483 (though dated 1493 in error). Two further editions, printed by Thomas Bertelette, appeared in the sixteenth century, no further print editions appearing until the nineteenth century. The first scholarly edition, edited by Doctor Reinhold Pauli, was published in 1857 in three volumes.

The *Confessions of a Lover* in its entirety consists of some 33,000 lines in eight Books — one for each of the seven Deadly Sins and one which is an excursus on the philosophy of morality. Many of the stories themselves are re-tellings of stories from elsewhere, drawn heavily from classical works and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in particular. The tales of love, of various outcomes, illustrate varieties of amorous experience, and all conclude in 'lessons' which the lover Amans can be instructed in by his confessor, Genius (a priest of the goddess of love, Venus).

John Gower (?1330-1408) was a man of very considerable learning. He is known in particular for three major works: *Mirour de l'Omme*, in French; *Vox Clamantis*, in Latin; and *Confessio Amantis*, in Middle English. For the last thirty years of his life he lived at the priory of St Mary Overie's in Southwark, London. His elaborate tomb, in Southwark Cathedral, displays an effigy of Gower himself, resting his head upon the three volumes of his most famous works.

The lines of *Confessions* are composed throughout in octosyllabic rhyming couplets. Whilst such a measure may well aid the memorising of lines for recitation, there are drawbacks to such a construction when attempting to make a re-telling of the *Confessio's* tales in a fluent version of contemporary English. There is, first, the obvious danger of producing doggerel verse; into which the octosyllabic form can so easily descend. There is the matter of 14th century vocabulary and pronunciation, together with the matter of syntactical inversion — as this small sample will show: 'and she Pauliné hight' for 'and she was called Pauline.' The accented é (as in Pauliné) causes problems throughout in any attempt to render Gower's lines since they add syllables which are redundant in today's language. The problem is compounded by the fact that the accented é appears also in nouns and in adjectives. A few examples at random will illustrate: herté (heart), lové, bothé (both). Examples of adjectives: sharpé, greté, godé (good). Redundant in modern English, these accented syllables restore the measure to the Gower verse. But their presence means that a word-for-word transliteration of lines where such words occur will not fill the syllabic measure required. To compound the matter some lines would end up two, or even on occasion three, syllables short. And yet, somehow, one must not resort to irrelevant padding to make the measure.

Re-told here are just four of the 141 tales in Gower's work. All four come from Book 1. The story of Acteon and that of Medusa are cautionary tales to illustrate the dangers of sight – *thin eyé for to keep and warde* – and the need to guard against being seduced by what is seen. Both the tale of Mundus and that of Florent illustrate the Deadly Sin of Pride; the first an illustration of Hypocrisy, the second that of Inobedience.

I began making my re-tellings of Gower's telling of the tales purely as an exercise, to see if they could be re-set as versions *spoken* in modern English without deviation (where possible) from ordinary syntactical form whilst retaining the verse measure. That meant avoiding the dangers identified above. I did permit myself one licence, however; to try to avoid the 'hammering' effect of constant full-rhyme, I allowed myself or even chose to use a half-rhyme where Gower's rhyming is seldom less than full (though instances do occur of part-rhyme).

Having met as best I could these challenges to myself, the versions were simply put away. Some years later my friend and long-time collaborator Edward Lee read them and immediately saw them as a spoken script, specifically as a *staged* presentation. Indeed a marked script for a stage production was produced, with music specially to be composed by Edward, and the introduction onto the stage of John Gower himself (a device Shakespeare used in *Cymbeline*, where Gower acts as the Chorus to the play). Other matters intervened for both of us and that project was never realised.

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The edition of *Confessio* from which my versions were made is (in its full title): *Tales of the Seven Deadly Sins, being the CONFESSIO AMANTIS of JOHN GOWER*, Edited by Henry Morley, London 1889. This edition restores the old spelling of words, reintroduces the final *e* and the accented *é* to words requiring them, and corrects errors of punctuation evident in previous editions.

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