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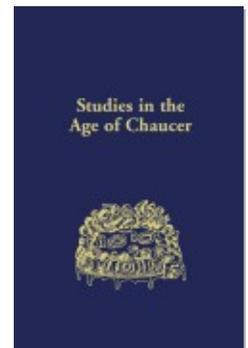
Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments ed.
by A. J. Minnis (review)

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ature as Recreation—“not an interpretation or a theory but documented facts.” Moreover, this book helps us clinch a number of issues left problematic by Allen’s *Ethical Poetic*, if only because Minnis, focusing as he does on the schoolmen, tenders the evidence in depth which Allen’s study (ranging across a much wider field of texts and theoretical applications) sometimes offers with a tantalizing parsimony. With Allen, Minnis concludes that the Middle Ages did indeed demand an ethical utility from its poetry; and, thus like Allen too, and Olson, he will force us, by dint of learning and persuasive style, to strip away an accumulated *sedimenta* of Enlightenment and Romantic habits of mind and revise many established criteria of judgment. Old, accustomed habits die hard, of course, and this makes reading *Medieval Theory of Authorship* a painful experience as well as a pleasure. But if we take Minnis at his word (and it is difficult not to: the extensive bibliography of primary and secondary materials supporting his viewpoints commands considerable respect), we will agree that he has helped lay the course theoretical criticism of medieval literature will have to pursue for years to come. Finally, it is this originality which most makes *Medieval Theory of Authorship* the important book that it is.

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A. J. MINNIS, ed. Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*: Responses and Reassessments. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983. Pp. 202. £27.50.

This attractive collection of essays is further testimony to the Gower revival evidenced by the books and articles that have appeared in recent years, and most recently by the creation of the John Gower Society by A. J. Minnis and R. F. Yeager. In the introduction to the volume, the editor adumbrates that British critics have sought Gower the love poet and focused on his “lust” while American critics have sought Gower the moral philosopher and focused on his “lore.” As one of these Americans, I am happy to observe that four of the eight essays treat Gower’s moral philosophy: Minnis’s own, “‘Moral Gower’ and Medieval Literary Theory;” Paul Miller, “John Gower, Satiric Poet;” Charles Runacres, “Art and Ethics in the Exempla of *Confessio Amantis*;” and Elizabeth Porter, “Gower’s Ethical

Microcosm and Political Macrocosm." The first two essays in the book treat Gower's art: J. A. Burrow, "The Portrayal of Amans in *Confessio Amantis*;" and Christopher Ricks, "Metamorphosis in Other Words." The last two treat the manuscripts and the poet's reputation: Jeremy Griffiths, "*Confessio Amantis*: The Poem and Its Pictures;" and Derek Pearsall, "The Gower Tradition."

Burrow discusses the way in which the text of the *Confessio* distinguishes between the youthful lover and the ancient poet and suggests that part of the effect of the conclusion results from the joining of the two concepts. Allusions both in the poetry and in the Latin glosses indicate specifically that the Lover is not the poet, and this distinction is preserved in the miniatures of the Lover's Confession found in many manuscripts, which depict the Lover as young and clean-shaven. However, the ambiguity is pointed up by the miniatures in two manuscripts which depict the Lover as an old man with a white beard. Burrow finds no evidence of the creation of a persona clearly distinct from the poet in the French court poems which served Gower as models for the *Confessio*. He does not go on to compare Gower's persona with Chaucer's, but it would appear that the two English poets were more sophisticated in their use of the persona than were any of their Continental contemporaries.

The conclusion to Christopher Ricks's essay is a restatement of one of the principal themes of the *Confessio*: "The art of Gower is a moral and spiritual metamorphosis. He transforms stories that are stonily inhuman or swampily subhuman, stories that are alive to the sick absurdities of sexual perversion and to the humiliations which the sexes visit upon each other, into a poetry of free simplicity" (p. 48). Other critics have explored the narrative dimension of the theme; Ricks explores its verbal dimension, showing how the language "incarnates" the metamorphoses. He discusses the multiple effects of "soft" and "thing" ("the two most potent words in Gower"). He compares the superior effect of Gower's plain style in the stories of Midas, Florent, Iphis, and Pygmalion to their more florid expression in other versions. Such subjective associative criticism is not for everyone, but at the hand of a master like Ricks it is persuasive.

Minnis, Miller, Runacres, and Porter enhance the portrait of Gower the moral philosopher. Minnis sees the interpretative method of the medieval commentaries on classical poets as the key to understanding the intention of much medieval poetry. The clerical authors of these commentaries viewed poetry as a form of ethical instruction. Minnis shows how, by placing classical love stories in a moral perspective Gower was following the

interpretations of Ovid and other pagan poets in the schoolbooks and how this method of interpretation shaped the strategy and structure of the *Confessio Amantis*. Paul Miller likewise traces Gower's technique to the Latin tradition, showing how Gower's poems exemplify the principles of medieval satire as they are set forth in the headnotes (the *accessus*) to the school texts. Miller rejects the distinction between "satire" and "complaint" developed by John Peter (1956) since what Peter designates complaint is what the medieval commentaries designate satire. Although it is historically accurate, this reduction seems to me to blur the distinctions between medieval and modern social criticism and between the achievements of Gower and Chaucer.

Charles Runacres discusses the "fit" between the *narraciones* and *moralitates* in the *Confessio*. Although he finds some instances in which Gower altered the details of the stories to make them fit better with the morals, he is aware how frequently the *narracio* asserts a different meaning from that required by the *moralitas* of the exposition (p. 124). Elizabeth Porter summarizes the *Secretum Secretorum* tradition lying behind book 7 of the *Confessio Amantis* and concludes that Gower intended that the poem should culminate in an explicit mirror for princes (p. 152). She offers the intriguing suggestion that the young Amans served as a surrogate for Richard II, and both Genius and the old poet as surrogates for Gower, who was, like Aristotle in the *Secretum*, a mentor to a prince. She suggests that the humiliating portrait of the aged poet in book 8 reflects the traditional humiliation of Alexander when as an old man he became infatuated with a young girl, allowing her to ride him like a horse. This is such an interesting reading that one wishes there were in the text some hint of Aristotle's humiliation beyond his presence in the company of ancient lovers at the end of book 8.

Jeremy Griffiths' essay on the illustrations in the *Confessio* manuscripts is a precursor to the "Catalogue of the Manuscripts of the Works of John Gower" being prepared by Griffiths, Kate Harris, and Derek Pearsall. Recent suggestions that the scribe of the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts wrote some of the Gower manuscripts and that the Fairfax and Stafford manuscripts preserve Gower's own spelling suggest that the new study of the manuscripts may provide valuable insights into both the textual history of Gower's poems and the dissemination of literature before printing. But although it provides material for such a history, Griffiths' essay provides no pattern. The puzzling question remains: why do the same illustrations appear in the manuscripts but in such different posi-

tions? And what is the relation between the placement and iconography of the illustrations and the textual filiations? It is to be hoped that the catalogue, when it appears, will contain reproductions of all the illustrations in all the manuscripts, since those in the essays by Griffiths and Burrow in this volume are so informative.

Derek Pearsall's essay rounds out and adds to previous discussions of Gower's reputation, concluding that changing taste is the best explanation for his decline in popularity. "Morality, from being the backbone of Gower's reputation, had become in the post-Romantic period the very stick with which he was beaten" (p. 194). Surely this is as much a comment on modern values as it is upon the quality of Gower's poetry. And perhaps the revival of interest in his poetry betokens a salutary improvement in our aesthetic sensibility.

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PAULA NEUSS, ed. *Aspects of Early English Drama*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, N. J.: Barnes & Noble, 1983. Pp. xv, 159. \$42.50.

The study of medieval drama has come far since 1952, when the editor of the Wakefield pageants began his text of the Second Shepherds' Play with the direction, "Scene: open fields near Bethlehem." This apparently innocuous aid encouraged the reader to imagine historical shepherds in ancient Palestine, begging many interesting questions about the nature of fifteenth-century dramatic art. Today it would be a mischievous or negligent teacher who sent students off to write about the "realism" of the Wakefield Master without telling them some of the rules of the "game" played on pageants; pointing, perhaps, to a volume of the Toronto *Records of Early English Drama* project; suggesting that Brecht might offer easier access to understanding medieval acting conventions than building the shepherds a mist-blowing machine; letting slip that Mrs. Noah was played by a man.

The new scholarship is oriented to performance, both historical and contemporary. Paula Neuss in her introduction to this collection draws attention to "the systematic scrutiny of all surviving records relating to the