

Conrad van Dijk. *John Gower and the Limits of the Law*.

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John Gower was fascinated with the law. In many of his works, across the three languages in which he wrote, legal issues and terminology abound. In *John Gower and the Limits of the Law*, Conrad van Dijk sets out to explore the intersection between the law and Gower's poetic practice, moving beyond thematic analysis (though the book certainly offers that) toward an attempt to refigure — or perhaps to show how Gower refigures — the exemplum and the practice of exemplarity. It is an ambitious agenda, and the result is a dense and rewarding book.

The medieval legal system, the author points out, “depended on exemplarity at every level” (22), so there is a natural connection between legal cases and exempla. Chapter 1 sketches out commonalities between these genres, laying the foundation for an exploration of what the author calls the judicial exemplum. Texts dealt with include *The Seven Sages of Rome*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, and Chaucer's “Summoner's Tale”: it is a strength of the book that its range of reference is broad, encompassing Latin and vernacular traditions, classical and medieval legal theory, and English legal

and political history. The chapter concludes with the author's observation that "the difficult case becomes the judicial exemplum" (32), and the rest of the book is devoted to exploring how Gower navigates legal difficulty.

Chapter 2 offers an overview of legal themes and terminology in the *Confessio Amantis*, setting up the more in-depth analyses of chapters 3, 4, and 5. Chapter 3 considers the problem of a ruler's sovereignty, set against the backdrop of international law, by which Van Dijk means the larger contexts of imperial and papal power. While the prologue to the *Confessio Amantis* emphasizes social division, Gower's particular treatment of *translatio imperii* also creates a sense of order in history, and allows for the possibility of a recuperative project. Once Genius turns to his exempla for the lover, there is often, Van Dijk notes, an "excessive element," something that "exceeds [the] interpretive frame" (65); in his reading of various Roman tales from book 2, the author shows that this element is often jurisdictional conflict. While I sometimes lost track of the complex argument by which the author moved from jurisdiction to envy, to the connection between law, love, and envy, to the workings of exemplarity, I find this notion of productive excess very helpful in dealing with the often-uncomfortable fit between Genius's exempla and Amans's situation. Individual readings in this chapter, too, are often illuminating. The "Tale of Constance" offers an idyllic picture of international law in which king, emperor, and pope all get along, while the other Roman tales show the many ways this concord can be disrupted. Chapter 4 shifts the emphasis to the sovereignty of a king in relation to his own laws. Van Dijk uses the *Vox clamantis* to explore Gower's understanding of the relationship of the king to the law, before moving into a discussion of book 7 of the *Confessio*. The problem for Gower, he argues, is to work out how the king can simultaneously be above and subject to the law. The many difficult cases of book 7 show the discomfort Gower feels with this paradox, and the chapter closes with the argument that as the cases become harder, Gower's desire for closure becomes greater, leading to a "strained exemplarity" (130).

Chapter 4 is the most dense and difficult of the chapters. The final chapter, on the other hand, achieves an admirable clarity, in its discussion of vengeance stories and exemplarity, thanks to the decision to focus on one story in the *Confessio*, the "Tale of Orestes." The range of references is wide, encompassing Gower's other works, Lollard trial documents, chronicles, and exempla collections, but the single story acts as an anchor for the reader. The chapter concludes by framing vengeance as a kind of "poetic justice that brings narrative closure" (187), crystallizing the connection between legal and narrative practice that has been at the heart of the book from the start.

John Gower and the Limits of the Law has much to offer readers interested in medieval English law and literature; Gower is its focus, but its ambitions are much larger. This study seeks to move legal literary analysis beyond the (very important) detailing of terminology, and beyond thick historicist reading, toward a place where form and legal matter coalesce. The route is sometimes winding, and some moments of the analysis are a bit opaque, but the project can only be commended.

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