

The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis.
Matthew W. Irvin.

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The timing of the publication of this book could not have been more fortuitous. It comes out at a moment when the question of Gower's place in literary history, especially in relation to Chaucer, has been reintroduced into a long-standing debate over the centrality of the author in English studies. That being said, Irvin's examination of Gower's poetic voices and the poet's construction of various personae in the *Confessio Amantis* is as much about the proper place of every person as it is about the poet's position in a literary continuum. A key phrase for Irvin's study is, in fact, *in propria persona*, which he uses to foreground the poet's position "in the political and poetic contexts" he creates, and, in legal terms, to define a person "by his action within a regulated social system" (4). In a wide-ranging study that includes other Gowerian works — the *Mirour de l'Omme*, the *Cinkante Balades*, the *Vox Clamantis*, and select short poems — Irvin prepares the way for a comprehensive reading of Gower's English masterwork that shows how the poet transposes the desire of *fin amour* into an ethical love based on prudence. By juxtaposing *factio* with *actio*, the making with the doing, and examining how desire is reshaped into ethical action, Irvin foregrounds Gower's fusion of the artful with the political. What is at stake in this relationship between prudence and art is "the place of love in the world" (1).

During the course of his explications of Gower's many voices, Irvin highlights the poet's trilingual skills, the range of his poetic acumen, his transposition of Aristotelian thought into an innovative vernacular poetic, his ability to read and write competently in Anglo-Norman and Latin, and his appeal to a diverse audience. Irvin establishes the place of the poet in the political realm by examining how he constructs personae for

himself as well as the principal characters of the *Confessio*, Genius and Amans, “making even his own presence as writer part of the prudential, political world about which he writes” (27).

Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* is an important work both poetically and politically, in part because of the poet’s early support of Richard II and a later transference of allegiance to Henry of Derby, the future Henry IV, a matter that Irvin touches upon in his concluding chapter. The personas Irvin examines throughout the book focus primarily on the dialogue that takes place between Genius and Amans during the telling of many tales, a discussion brought to a crescendo in the education of the king offered in book 7, exemplified by the Tale of Apollonius of Tyre in book 8. Counter to much scholarly criticism, Irvin suggests that Apollonius, at least in the beginning of the tale, is not the perfect model of kingship we might expect him to be, but rather a prince who needs to learn through experience how to be an effective monarch. One might say the same for the education of the poet, as the revelation of an aged John Gower posing as the youthful Amans throughout the *Confessio* makes clear at the poem’s end; Gower’s audience gains from the unveiling of the poet’s persona in the finale, Irvin argues, because “the art of the poem transfers that experience to readers in the real world without aging them” (287).

Will all readers of the *Confessio Amantis* recognize the fatuousness of *fin amour* and the benefits of living a prudent life? Will they be transformed by reading or listening to such a complex work of storytelling art? What if the audience contains readers unable to identify with any of Gower’s principal personas? Added consideration of recent work done on Gower’s understanding of the role of women, both as counselors and teachers, might have contributed another dimension to Irvin’s study. The voices of women animated by an ethically minded, politically savvy poet speak just as persuasively as the personas of Amans, Genius, and the poet himself. Perhaps this aspect of persona construction would make for a complementary sequel to this noteworthy contribution to Gower studies.

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