

ON GOWER, THE KENTISH POET, HIS CHARACTER
AND WORKS.¹

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IN introducing the once popular and still famous John Gower to your notice as a Kentish worthy, it may be expected that cause should be shown in support of the claim of Kent to the appropriation. For is it not, or, at all events, was it not an universally received tradition that the poet of the Plantagenets belonged to Yorkshire? Was he not alleged to have been one of that ancient and noble Anglo-Saxon race, whose head at the time of the Norman Conquest was Sir Allan Gower, lord of the manor of Stittenham in that county; and whose present chief, the Duke of Sutherland, sits among the peers as Baron Gower of Stittenham? Did not Mr. Todd, a client of that noble house, publish a book on the poets Gower and Chaucer about half a century ago, and declare that this connection with the poet was a "proud family tradition"?² Nay, did not the Marquess of Stafford, in 1830 (then the head of the family, for the dukedom of Sutherland was not created till later), give the strongest proof of his own belief in

¹ Read to the Archæological Institute, at its meeting at Rochester, August, 1862.

² Todd's 'Illustrations of the Lives of Chaucer and Gower,' page xxi. London, 1810.

this connection, by reinstating the poet's tomb in the transept of St. Mary Overy, Southwark?

But the inquiring criticism of modern times has shaken this tradition. In the first place, the authority on which it rests is inconclusive. The testimony relied on is that of Leland,¹ the antiquary of Henry VIII.'s time. But he advances no evidence: he had only heard it ("ut ego accepi"); somebody had told him that Gower was a native of Stittenham in Yorkshire. And another report, with apparently still less foundation than Leland's, had prevailed at an earlier period. Caxton, who was born within a few years of Gower's death, and who printed the first edition of the 'Confessio Amantis' in 1483, says that its author was born in Wales. But as he also says that his birth occurred in the reign of Richard II., whereas Gower is known to have been born thirty-three years, at least, before that king's succession, it seems clear that Caxton spoke without any certain knowledge.²

Yet some better information seems to have been current for upwards of two centuries after the poet's death. Weever, in his 'Funeral Monuments,'³ published in 1631, indicated the true origin of John Gower;—a family of respectability and position holding property in Suffolk, and very probably in Kent, before the poet's time. A Sir Robert Gower was buried at Brabourne, near Smeeth, in Kent. And it is in describing his monument in the chancel of that church that Weever states, "from this familie John Gower the poet was descended." This assertion, however, seems to

¹ Comment. de Scriptoribus Britannicis, ed. Hale, page 414; quoted by Dr. Pauli in his edition of the 'Confessio Amantis,' introductory essay, page vi.

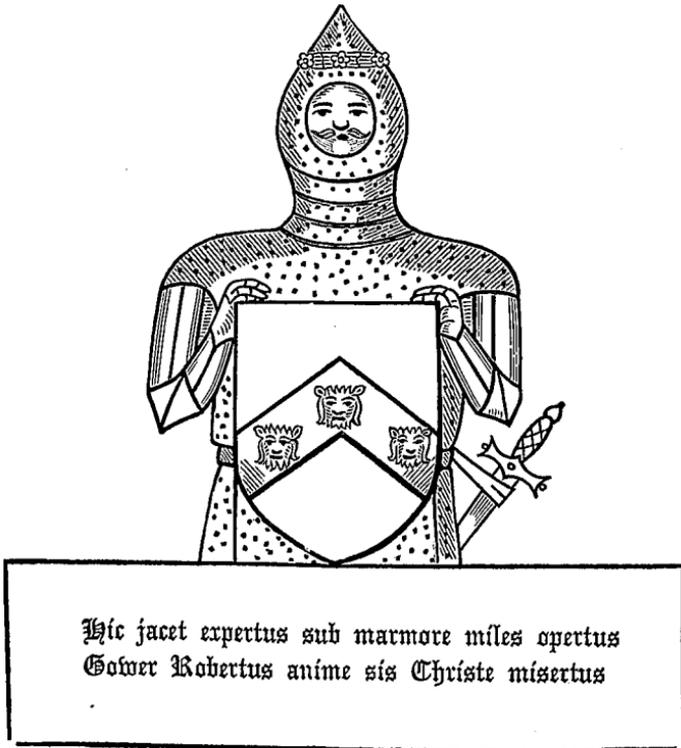
² [This error of Caxton's is the more remarkable, as we may suppose that he would gladly have claimed Gower as a countryman and neighbour.]

³ Folio, 1631, page 270.

have remained unregarded for two centuries, postponed to the "ego accipi" of Leland, and sometimes even to the more obvious error of Caxton; for the connection between the poet and the peerage was always likely to strike men's minds. The labours of that keen and indefatigable antiquary, the late Sir Harris Nicolas, first gave force and substance to Weever's passing remark so long neglected. He published in the 'Retrospective Review'¹ a sort of monograph on the question, in which he all but demonstrated that Gower the poet was *not* a member of the family settled at Stittenham in Yorkshire, and *was* of the family of Gower of Suffolk,—probably also of Kent, since its then head was buried in the latter county. Some additional researches more recently made in the tracks first pointed out by Sir Harris, added to his own, establish the fact that a John Gower, identified beyond all question with the poet, described himself in two deeds as "esquire of Kent."

The manner in which Sir Harris Nicolas established his case is so remarkable an instance of industry in research and sagacity in the application of facts to a doubtful question, that it has interest as a specimen of reasoning, apart from the end pursued. The best family evidence of those times is to be found in heraldry and records. There was no difficulty in finding out the poet's arms, for they are upon his tomb in St. Mary Overy. They differ in every point from those of the Gowers of Stittenham. The poet bore on a chevron three leopards' heads; the Gowers of Yorkshire bear their shield barry of eight with a cross flory over all,—two coats as unlike each other as can well be imagined. The crest of the poet is a talbot, that of the Yorkshiresmen a wolf, differing too in all the smaller

¹ Second series, vol. ii. p. 103.



Brass of Sir Robert Gower, Brabourne Church.

and technical points. But the arms of Sir Robert Gower¹ (formerly preserved in Brabourne Church) are



From the original Deed of 1373 preserved in the British Museum. (Cart. Ant. 50, i. 14.)

identical with those on the poet's monument. Sir Harris was equally lucky in his legal inquiry. He discovered that on Thursday, the 30th September, 1373, John Gower executed a deed, dated from Otford, conferring the whole of his manor of Kentwell in Suffolk upon John Cobham, knight, William de Weston, Roger de Asshebournhame, Thomas de Brokhull, and Thomas de Preston, rector of Tunstall; of which

¹ [The illustration given is a fac-simile of Philipot's sketch of this brass

five at least were Kent men. And to this deed a seal is attached, the crest and arms on which are the same as those on the poet's tomb.¹ It appears also from the poet's will, preserved at Lambeth, and first published by Todd,² that two at least of Gower's four executors were Kent men, and one of them, Sir Arnald Savage, a near relation of the Cobhams,³ the other being William Denne.

These facts seem sufficient of themselves to transfer Gower from Yorkshire to Kent. But other curious legal instruments exist, tending to connect him with Kent, and to establish his position as a man of property. Unluckily they also appear to throw an unsentimental light upon the poet's character, seeming to indicate that he was somewhat of a speculator and land-jobber. The

in a MS. volume of his, called 'Church Noates of Kent,' preserved among the Harleian MSS., No. 3917, page 77.—T. G. F.]

¹ 'Retrospective Review,' l. c.

² Todd's 'Illustrations,' cited above.

³ [I append another evidence of the poet's connection with the Cobham family, taken from the Surrenden MSS. lately dispersed. It is a receipt from John Gower to Sir John de Cobham, dated June 24, 1382, for 100 shillings and 6 pence, and is sealed with the crest and initials of the poet.

"Sachonnt toutes gents moy Johñ Gower avois ressuz de Monsr John de Cobham seigneur de Cobham Cent et sys southers sys deniers en pleine paiement de toutes maneres dettes dil comencement dil monnde tannke a la jour de fesaunte dycestes des queux cent et sys southers sys deniers en pleine paiement comme avant est dit moys avantdit Johñ Gower conuz estre paieez et lavantdit Monsr Jobñ ses heires et executors quitez a toutz jours par ceste presentes enseales de mon seal. Don le Mardy en le feste de Nativite seynt John le Babtist lan du reane le Roi Richard seconde puis la conquest sisme."



(Endorsed ; "Aq'auunce Johñ Gower de paiement.")—T. G. F.]

earliest deed that has been discovered among our records relating to the Gowers of Suffolk and Kent is a grant on the 25th June, 1333, of the before-mentioned manor of Kentwell in Suffolk by the Earl of Atholl to Sir Robert Gower,¹ perhaps the Sir Robert already mentioned. On the 28th June, 1368, Thomas Syward, pewterer and citizen of London, and Joan his wife, daughter and heiress of Sir Robert Gower, granted the same manor of Kentwell to John Gower,¹ who appears to have been Joan's next heir, and near relation, probably her first cousin,—this Kentwell being the very property which John Gower dealt with five years later, using the seal given above. A deed of earlier date shews that this was not the poet's first acquisition in land, as well as that he must have been born in 1344 at the latest; for in 1365 William, son of William Septvans, knight, granted to John Gower and his heirs a rental of ten pounds (according to the statist, equivalent to £150 a year now) out of the manor of Wygebergh in Essex, and released to him and his heirs by a second instrument the manor of Aldyngton in Kent,² with the rent of one cock, thirteen hens, and forty

¹ 'Retrospective Review,' l. c., from the original Charters and Inquisitions.

² Rot. Claus. 39 Ed. III. memb. 21, dors. [The nature of this transaction, by which Gower became possessed for a short time of one moiety of the manor of Aldington-Septvans, in Thurnham, will be found in some detail in the account of the "Probatio ætatis of William de Septvans," given in our first Volume, page 124; and is still less to the poet's credit than Mr. Warwick has exhibited. It appears that William de Septvans, while still a minor, had procured (by means, probably, of a suborned jury) a false "Probatio ætatis," declaring him to be of full age; had thus obtained a tortious delivery of his estates from the hands of the Crown, in which they were vested by reason of his minority; and had thereupon alienated them to John Gower and others. It will be seen that the whole arrangement was a conspiracy to defraud a weak young spendthrift of his property, and that Gower was one of the foremost in the plot; for "the said William was continually abiding in the company of Richard Hunt and John Gower, at Canterbury and elsewhere, and was there led away by them and counselled to alienate his lands and tene-

eggs out of Maplescomb. On the 3rd February, 1381, Isabella, daughter of Walter de Huntingfield, remits all the right and claim she has from her father to certain lands and tenements belonging to the parishes of Throwlèy and Stalesfield in the county of Kent to John Gower and John Rowland, clerk. On the 1st August, 1382, Guy de Rowcliffe, clerk, grants and confirms the manor of Feltwell in Norfolk and the manor of Multon in Suffolk . . . to *John Gower, esquire, of Kent*.¹ By another deed¹ John Gower releases Guy from "all manner of warranty for the said manors," and acknowledges the release in Chancery in person on the 28th of the same month of August. At the same time he grants leases of these two manors to Thomas Blakewell and four others at the rent of £40 (£600 now), to be paid annually in the conventual church at Westminster.² Still it may be said, and truly, that however convincing of identity all this may be, it does not carry *certainty* with it. It is possible that there might be two John Gowers of the same family, living at the same time, and bearing the same arms. But

ments." This was in 1364 (38 Ed. III.), and a few months later, March 6, 1364-5, we find John Gower regularly declared to be seised in fee by an "Inquisitio ad quod damnum" (Inq. 39, Ed. III. 2nd nos. 36), having no doubt put a successful fraud on the Inquisition by means of the false "Probatio." But a second writ "de ætate probanda" was issued in 1367 (40 Ed. III.), when William de Septvans was found to be still under age, and upon this Parliament decreed that the estate be resealed into the King's hands and all deeds executed by the minor annulled. It would seem however either that this decree was evaded, or that William de Septvans on really coming of age honourably held himself responsible for his act as a minor, and ratified the bargain: for we find Sir John de Cobham and Gower's four other feoffees seised of this moiety of Aldington in 1374, together with his other manor of Keytwell as mentioned above (Inq. 47 Ed. III. 2nd, nos. 59). They were probably holding the property to the uses of his will, the then newly invented method of rendering real estate devisable.—T. G. F.]

¹ Rot. Claus. 6 Rich. II. p. 1, memb. 27, dors.

² Rot. Claus. 6 Rich. II. p. 1, memb. 23, dors., 7 Rich. II. memb. 17, dors. Cited by Dr. Pauli, 'Introductory Essay,' pp. xi, xii.

that the last-mentioned John Gower, at least, describing himself as *esquire of Kent*, was in reality the poet, is established beyond all question through this manor of Multon. In his will, made thirty-six years after the acquisition of this manor, he leaves his widow, for her life, the full enjoyment of all rents due to him from the lease of his two manors, Southwell in Nottingham, and *Multon* in Suffolk.¹

The frequent dealings in land, at a time when some discredit attached to such proceedings, indicate that Gower had a shrewd turn for business as well as poetry. This conclusion receives further support from the fact that Chaucer, a man of the world himself, and nearly all his life engaged in public business, selected his brother bard to act as one of his attorneys when, in May, 1378, Chaucer left England on a diplomatic mission to the Continent.² This would argue a degree of intimacy between the two poets, which seems confirmed by the compliments they respectively paid each other. Chaucer dedicated his 'Troilus and Cresseyde' to Gower and another friend.

"O moral Gower! this boke I direct
To thee and to the philosophical Strode."³

Besides implied compliments in passing, Gower offers to Chaucer a graceful eulogy in the 'Confessio Amantis,' finished about 1392-3.⁴ Yet many years after Gower

¹ [For much other pedigree, conjectural and otherwise, of the Kent Gowers, the reader is referred to Sir Harris Nicolas's article in the 'Retrospective Review,' cited above. It is a slight additional link between the poet and Kent, that Winstanley quotes Stow as follows:—"His 'Vox Clamantis' with his 'Cronica Tripartita,' and other works, both in Latine and French, Stow saith he had in his possession, but his 'Speculum Meditantis' he never saw, but heard thereof to be in Kent." Winstanley's 'Lives of English Poets,' 1687, page 21.—T. G. F.]

² 'Life of Chaucer,' by Sir Harris Nicolas, pp. 39, 125.

³ L'Envoye to 'Troilus and Cresseyde.'

⁴ 'Confessio Amantis' of John Gower, edited by Dr. Reinhold Pauli, in three volumes, 1857. Prologus, pp. 1-5.

had consented to act as his friend's "attorney," and of course some time after their interchange of friendly compliments, and, which is sadder, when both were in "their daies old," an estrangement seems to have taken place between the poets. The proofs of this quarrel are indeed so dubious that some deny its existence. But the inference seems too well supported to allow of much doubt as to a quarrel, though the causes and circumstances are unknown. Unhappily, what we do know does not seem to reflect much credit upon Gower. The facts are as follows. In the prologue to the *Man of Lawes tale*, Chaucer makes his Serjeant-at-law travel out of the record to censure certain unnatural stories which Gower has treated in the 'Confessio Amantis.' And what seems stranger in so hearty a man as Chaucer, he puts a favourable notice of himself into the mouth of his Serjeant, who then proceeds to enumerate Gower's wicked tales.¹

On the other hand, Gower having paid an elegant compliment to Chaucer in the first copies or edition of the 'Confessio Amantis,' afterwards omitted it. In the face of these facts, it seems unreasonable to doubt Tyrwhitt's conclusion as to a difference having taken place, especially as Chaucer's censure looks pointed, being uncalled for by any literary necessity. But whether Chaucer began the attack, or Gower provoked it by omitting the compliment, is utterly unknown. And we know as little of any cause that might lead to either of these proceedings. Sir Harris Nicolas considered the suspicion light, for reasons quite as light themselves. Mr. Wright thinks that "there was no good foundation for the notion" of a quarrel, but advances no reason for the conclusion. Dr. Pauli, Gower's latest editor, is of the same opinion, and assigns these reasons. The complimentary verses, he conceives, were omitted,

¹ "On whiche corsed stories I seye fy."—*The Man of Lawe's Prologe*.

“ At a time when Chaucer was in trouble with the existing government. . . . It is therefore not unlikely that Gower, *timid* and *obsequious* by nature, had some reason for not mentioning his friend. . . . The omission may show *selfish* feeling on the part of Gower, but it certainly does not prove that their friendship was interrupted.”¹

As the trouble of Chaucer with the existing government involved his loss of employment, and reduced him to pecuniary difficulties, if not to distress, he might not take so transcendental a view of his selfish friend as Dr. Pauli does, and so of himself interrupt the friendship. There are other alterations in Gower's great work which seem to cast as much discredit upon him as even the abandonment of an old friend in his troubles. It is well known that Gower was personally favoured by Richard II. The ‘*Confessio Amantis*,’ indeed, was written at the young king's suggestion. So familiar was he with the poet, that when they met one day upon the Thames, the king bade Gower come from his own boat into the royal barge, where, as he tells us in his ‘*Prologus*,’—

“ Amongés other thingés said,
He hath this charge upon me laid,
And bad me do my besinesse,
That to his highe worthynesse
Some newe thing I shulde boke
That he him self it mighte loke
After the forme of my writing.”

Confessio Amantis: Prologus.

The narrative is accompanied by some flattery to the king, while at the end of the work, in juxtaposition with the (afterwards omitted) compliment to Chaucer, stood a panegyric on Richard. And an elegant panegyric it was, for in allusion to the discontents and disturbances of the times, the poet holds that the king himself is not affected by the misdeeds of his officers,

¹ ‘*Confessio Amantis*,’ Introductory Essay, vol. i. page xv.

any more than the sun is really dimmed by clouds or bad weather in the lower regions of the air. And the poet prophesies that the king's efforts to save his people shall be ever recorded in history :

“ Wherefore that his cronique shall
For ever be memoriall.”

Whatever may be the case with the “cronique,” the poetical “memoriall” lasted as long as the prosperity of the king, and no longer. It was then removed, to give place to a panegyric on Richard's dethroner and successor, Henry IV. Of course these facts have not tended to raise the character of Gower among those few who have inquired about him. Ritson, putting the conclusion in his caustic manner, designates the poet as “an ingrate to his lawful sovereign, and a sycophant to the usurper of his throne.”¹ Dr. Pauli demurs to this. He conceives that these changes were made some years before Henry of Lancaster's acquisition of the crown, and at the same time as the compliment to Chaucer was omitted (though this theory would involve some confusion in dates). The Doctor further ascribes the omissions to Gower's patriotic dissatisfaction with Richard's public conduct. But this theory does not square with Gower's opinion just quoted, that Richard was not responsible for the misgovernment of his officers. It is equally opposed to the whole tenor of the passage, and irreconcilable with the timidity ascribed to the poet by Dr. Pauli, as accounting for the omission of the compliment to Chaucer. This compliment merely related to his poetical character,—to his popularity and literary merit, which Richard himself would probably have been the last man in the kingdom to deny. Indeed, about the time assumed by Dr. Pauli, the king granted Chaucer a pension. Further, if Gower was so “timid, obsequious, and selfish” as to

¹ ‘*Bibliographia Poetica*,’ 1802, page 25.

omit a mere literary compliment, lest it should give offence, was he likely to insult the king and the royal party by offering such a personal affront as the expunging of a panegyric upon him, and the insertion in its place of another panegyric upon his most powerful opponent, whom the king seems to have regarded with a suspicion but too well justified by the event. It is to be feared that there were *three* editions of the 'Confessio Amantis;' the first, containing the compliments to Chaucer and the king; the second, omitting the praise of Chaucer when he had lost his place; and the third, expunging the praises of the king when he had lost his crown, and substituting for them a dedication to his successor.

We will now pass on to his works; and read as they must be now with the eyes of the present, it must be admitted that the reputation of the poet is greater than his productions will sustain. Yet in his own day, and for more than a century afterwards, his popularity is said to have vied with that of Chaucer. For this there is of course a reason. Gower, though not a man of great and living genius, had a genius for the subordinate and mechanical parts of literature. He had nothing of Chaucer's mastery over the English language; neither did he reach that thorough perception of its musical capabilities, and that command of its various metres, which Chaucer displayed. But Gower had cultivated a clear terse style, and acquired an ease and smoothness in octosyllabic verse which even yet is often pleasing, and sometimes forcible. To his own age, accustomed as it was to the uncouth and crabbed versification of mediæval poetry, it must have seemed something marvellous. But Gower's matter, and even his spirit, were abstract and occasionally flat; and like most mediæval writers, he had a prolixity that was something terrible:—"a lengthened thought that gleams through many a page."

His great contemporaries, Chaucer and Piers Ploughman, drew direct from life, and more or less embodied classes, individuals, and the social features of their age, in dramatic and storied form. The literary power of these two authors was great and various; but it was after all a secondary feature in their works. In Gower it was a principal characteristic. But his matter was seldom drawn from living observation. He rather deduced it from books or elaborated it by meditation. Even that which he did derive from observation or reflection (powers in which he was gifted), he presented in an abstract, or at least a generalized form. Hence his works are more remarkable for skilful manipulation, than for those truthful traits and that living spirit which delineation from nature generally imparts. His stories sometimes drag in the narrative, and his persons are less living beings than drawn "characters," though he was very skilful in this sort of work. So strong indeed is Gower's turn for the abstract, that it is astonishing how little is found in the 30,000 lines of the 'Confessio Amantis' that really reflects his own age. But he was a literary artist, and had a species of originality in the treatment of a story. Where the subject had sufficient substance, he rose beyond the mere tale, which, except in the romances of chivalry, was the fashion of those days, into the variety and complication of modern prose fiction. And of this the story on which the play of 'Pericles' is founded is an eminent example. His judgment in the *technical conduct of his story* sometimes exceeded that of Chaucer. In points that depend upon conventional propriety, "moral Gower," as Chaucer calls him, had the advantage. But in questions where the common or conventional cease to avail, Chaucer's genius asserts itself in immeasurable superiority.

The critical or essay-like tendency of Gower's mind furnish a sufficient reason for the decline of his popu-

larity. Nothing but great genius, occupied on human life and human passions, can support the attraction of a work, when the fashions and ideas of its author's age have passed away. At the same time the great popularity of Gower, so long as the system of society under which he lived remained in vigour, is quite intelligible; and his historical fame is quite deserved. As already intimated, he aided in the improvement of the diction and versification of our language, and, in the technical character at least, of English *belles-lettres*. He would also seem to have added to our stock of proverbial wisdom, for many shrewd and penetrating remarks are scattered through his works. Then he provided successive generations with a library of fiction, chosen from classical, Oriental, and mediæval sources, whose faults were little felt as faults to his readers of those days, and whose comparative propriety of language and action generally surpassed that of even mediæval divines. Nor was it for fiction alone that the 'Confessio Amantis' was valuable. What is a drawback to a modern reader, namely, a system of moral philosophy, and a *coup d'œil* of mediæval science, both rather awkwardly introduced into poetry, was an advantage to Plantagenet and early Tudor times. It supplied a want by presenting as much of science and letters as a gentleman then required, and presenting it in an easy and readable way. Excepting selected passages, no one would now read Gower save with some object, though his name is so well known. Yet in the time of Shakspeare his popularity was still so great, that 'Pericles, Prince of Tyre,' was founded upon Gower's 'Tyro of Apollonæus.' And the author, whether Shakspeare, as some affirm, some deny, and some doubt, or an unknown writer, introduces "ancient Gower" instead of a recommendatory chorus, and puts into his mouth this high praise of the story:—

“ It hath been sung at festivals,
 On Ember Eves and Holy Ales,
 And lords and ladies, of their lives,
 Have read it for restoratives.”

And the compliment paid by the author, whoever he be, is deserved; for it is a good example of skilful structure and management in the telling of a complex story.

“ Learned in two tongues ” is the compliment of Ovid to a lady. But ancient Gower was learned in three; at all events, he wrote a leash of languages,—Latin, French, and English. His French writings remain in MS., except some ballads and short poems printed in 1818 by the Roxburghe Club. They are written, as may be supposed, on the Provençal model, which then served as the type of civilized Europe in love songs. Some of them possess a species of artificial and affected grace, which is common to the Provençal School, and a perception of natural beauty, which, if not peculiar to Gower, is less common. Of his Latin compositions, the ‘ Vox Clamantis ’ is the most remarkable; and but for Gower’s turn to the abstract and his submission to the allegorical form of composition, so fashionable during the middle ages, it would have been a valuable and unique work. The main subject was the insurrection of the lower orders under Wat Tyler. Could Gower have been satisfied with narrating what he knew, and giving his estimate of the causes and character of the insurrection, the world would have had an original account of one of the most curious and important passages in English history; though allowance must have been made for his class prejudices, and the conservative timidity of a prosperous man. Unfortunately he has thrown the insurrection into the form of an allegorical vision, and a very unskilful form, looked at as a means of furnishing information. His real object in the ‘ Vox Clamantis ’

seems to have been to write an essay or discourse on the insurrection, tracing its causes to the bestial nature of the people, and the evil deeds of the other orders of society, which brought down judgment upon them in the form of a revolt. He dreams that men assume the form of animals, and then wanders on to the ills of the world, the abuses of the Church, the vices of churchmen and the other orders of society, not forgetting the lawyers, and winds up the whole with a moral drawn from Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

The great English work of Gower, the 'Confessio Amantis,' so far resembles the 'Canterbury Tales,' that it is a very various collection of stories connected together by a species of framework. But the stories have seldom any direct relation to contemporary life, and Gower's scheme is inferior to Chaucer's in variety and reality. Properly, the framework of the 'Confessio' should have been a vision, and by no other form can it be received as even poetically probable, though it is not represented as passing in a dream. The author *and* lover, under the name of Amans, wanders into a wood on a May morning, when everything is cheerful but himself. Wretched through his ill-success in love, Amans roams about till he finds a sweet, green plain, on which he throws himself, and, as a last resource, offers up a prayer to Venus and Cupid for aid. Both appear. The god of love looks loweringly upon poor Amans, and passes on. But before he goes he shoots a "fiery dart" through his "hertes rote," and that is all the benefit Amans derives from Cupid. Venus is not very gracious; but she does listen to her worshipper. It is, however, only to express doubts of his being a real servant of hers, or anything but a faitour (lazy, incapable fellow, a hanger about,—an idea which reappears at the close). She therefore hands him over to her confessor, Genius, to shrive him, charging Amans to tell

“al thy thought and al thy werke.” Thereupon Amans uplifts his head,

“And gan beholde
The selfe preste, which as she wolde
Was redy there, and set him doune
To here my confession.”

Amans, however, is so disturbed, that he fears he may not “his wittes get,” and

“So shal I moche thing forzete,
But if thou wolt my shrifte oppose¹
Fro point to pointe, than, I suppose,
There shall nothing be left behinde.”

Genius tells him there is no occasion in confession to be quaint (daintily refined); but he must be plain and true. However he, Genius, will aid him, and not only speak of love, but of other things, “that touchen to the cause of vice.” Thereupon they set to work, Genius requiring his penitent to begin with his five senses, how he has used or misused them, and first of the eye. This the confessor deems “the most principall of alle,” and likely to lead to evil in various ways. After some general remarks, he proceeds to tell a tale by which Amans may learn,

“Thine eye for to kepe and warde,²
So that it passe nought his warde.”³

The tale itself is the story of Actæon, and when the unfortunate hunter has been duly eaten by his own dogs, Genius points the moral.

“Lo now, my sone, what it is
A man to caste his eye amis,
Which Acteon hath dere abought,
Beware forthy⁴ and do it nought.
For ofte, who that hede toke,
Better is to winke than to loke.”⁵

¹ Question, cross-examine.

² Guard.

³ Right place. (Query, from a sentry on guard?)

⁴ Therefore.

⁵ If a man takes heed, he will often find it

Better to shut his eyes, than to pry too closely.

The story of Medusa furnishes another instance of an ill-use of eyesight, and the Sirens of hearing. When the wittes (senses) are dismissed, Genius proceeds to the seven deadly sins. But they are increased in number by including their offshoots,—as hypocrisy is considered as a part of pride. There is variety in the treatment of the poem; but the usual plan is for the confessor to expound the general nature of the vice, to tell some stories that illustrate it, and then to call upon Amans to make a clean breast as regards the vice in hand. Thus when Genius treats of idleness, and demands of his penitent whether he can charge himself with that vice, he boldly answers No. Love will not let him be idle. During absence imagination is at work. In the presence of his mistress he is fully employed. Amans' account of the manner in which he is engaged forms one of the few direct contemporary sketches to be found in the work, And it offers a curious enough picture of a gallant's behaviour in the boudoir and the bedroom, during the latter part of the fourteenth century; for in that time those rooms had not ceased to be one.

“ And so whan time is, by her leve
 What thing she bit¹ me don, I do,
 And where she bit me gon, I go,
 And when her list to clepe,² I come.
 Thus hath she fulliche overcome
 Min idelnesse, til I sterve,³
 So that I mot her nedes serve.
 For as men sain, nede hath no law,
 Thus mot I nedely to her drawe,
 I serve, I bowe, I loke, I loute,⁴
 Min eye folweth her aboute.
 What so she wolle, so woll I,
 Whan she woll sit, I knele by,
 And when she stont, than woll I stonde;
 And when she taketh her werk on honde

¹ Bid.² Call.³ Die.⁴ Bow submissively.

Of weving or of embrouderie,
 Than can I nought but muse and prie
 Upon her fingers long and small.
 And now I sing and now I sike¹
 And thus my contenance I pike.²
 And if it falle, as for a time
 Her liketh nought abide byme³
 But busien her on other thinges,
 Than make I other tarienges.
 To drecche⁴ forth the longe day,
 For me is loth departe away.
 And than I am so simple of porte.
 That for to feign some desporte,
 I pleie with her litel hound
 Nowe on the bed, nowe on the ground,
 Now with the birddes in the cage,
 For there is none so litel page
 Ne yet so simple a chamberere,
 That I ne make hem⁵ alle chere,
 All for they shulde speke wele.
 Thus may ye se my besy whele,
 That goth not ideliche aboute.
 And if her list to riden oute
 On pelrinage or other stede
 I come though I be nought bede,
 And take her in min arme alofte
 And sit her in hersadel softe
 And so forth lede her by the bridel,
 For that I wolde not ben idel.
 And if her list to ride in chare,
 And then I may thereof beware,
 Anon I shape me to ride
 Right even by the charés side.
 And as I may, I speke amonge,
 And other while I singe a song."

The manner in which "good society" passed its evenings five hundred years ago is intimated in another passage in a somewhat similar occasion. The confessor has asked Amans if he has been sleepy over his love, but he promptly repudiates the imputation. It sharpens

¹ Sigh.² Adapt to the occasion.³ By me.⁴ Draw.⁵ Them.

the point of Amans' dancing if it is remembered that the author lover was approaching sixty, if he had not reached it.

"... I no sompnolence have used.
 For certes, fader Genius,
 Yet unto now it hath be thus
 At alle time if it befelle,
 So that I mighte come and dwelle
 In place there my lady nere,
 I was nought slow ne slepy there.
 For than I dare well undertake
 That whan her list on nightes to wake
 In chambre as to cavole and daunce,
 Me thenketh I may me more avaunce,
 If I may gone upon her honde,
 Than if I wounne¹ a kinges londe.
 For when I may her hond beclippe,
 With such gladness I daunce and skippe,
 Me thenketh I touche nought the floor,
 The roo² which renneth on the moor
 Is then nought so light as I.
 So now ye witen all forthy
 That for the time slepe I hate.
 And when it falleth othergate,³
 So that her like nought to daunce,
 But on the dees⁴ to caste chaunce,
 Or axe of love some demaunde,
 Or elles that her list commaunde,
 To rede and here of Troilus."⁵

To modern notions the form of confession, with a *priest of Venus* for confessor, may seem incongruous or irreverent; but to that age it would appear as a thing of course. The world was not critical in the fourteenth century, and saw nothing out of the way in love as a worship, or religion; or in martyrs and saints of Venus. We should also bear in mind the universality of confession in those times, so that the practice came home to every one's experience, affecting his memory gravely, or

¹ Won.

² Roe.

³ Other way.

⁴ Dice.

⁵ A passing compliment to Chaucer.

it may be jocosely. Nor is the scheme without advantage in a literary point of view. Relief and a kind of dramatic character is imparted by the colloquies of confessor and penitent. Amans admits or qualifies his faults. Sometimes he calls for further information, which leads to another story. It may be objected that these stories have occasionally little relation to love, that they are sometimes introduced in a forced manner, and do not always illustrate the subject they are adduced to enforce. But, in reality, Gower's purpose was to bring together a series of stories likely to interest his readers, as well as to infuse into his work a large amount of the general knowledge of those times. This is done with a somewhat puerile, not to say awkward art. The confessor tells several stories to warn his penitent against the employment of magic practices in love; the chief tale under this head being evidently suggested by the claim of Alexander the Great to a descent from Jupiter Ammon. When the confessor of Venus has pointed the moral, Amans declares that he will never have recourse to sorcery. But Alexander having thus been brought into court, Amans requests his ghostly father to tell him how the great king was taught by Aristotle, as it will divert his mind from his love and lessen his pain. At this request Genius pours forth two hundred pages treating of the training and conduct proper to a king, and expounding the elements of a "liberal and polite education." As regards science this has long since been superseded, however popular and useful in the Plantagenet and early Tudor times. Its moral lessons are applicable to all periods. But the whole is of no other value now than as a short cut to the range and kind of knowledge expected from a highly educated gentleman in mediæval England, and an example of Gower's literary dexterity in presenting scientific matter in verse.

If the framework of the 'Confessio Amantis' be regarded as a story in itself, it might pass as a good-natured satire on elderly lovers, Johan himself representing the class. If this were the intention of the author, it is marred by the extreme length of the poem,—nearly thirty thousand lines. The fortune of Amans is thus subordinated in interest, if not lost sight of, by the tales told to him. However, when they are all finished, he expresses his obligations to his confessor, for what he has said,—

“As thing which worthy is to here,
Of grete ensample and grete matere,
Whereof my fader God you quite.”

Still he is no nearer to his end than at the outset, and his “fader” can only aid him by wise saws and exhortations. At last it is determined that Amans shall write a poetical address to Venus, which Genius shall carry. In the result the goddess appears, but only to discourage the elderly lover. She frankly tells him he is too old, and altogether unfit for her service.

It was in this part of the poem that the compliment to Chaucer was originally inserted, and it is the comparison that Venus herself is represented as drawing between Gower and his friend that constitutes both the force and delicacy of the praise. Ere Venus departs, she gives Johan some further advice as regards himself, and finally sends a message to her own poet.

“And grete well Chaucer, when ye mete,
As my disciple and my poete.
For in the flourés of his youth,
In sondry wise, as he well couth,
Of dittees and of songés glade,
The which he for my sake made,
The lond fulfilled¹ is over all,
Whereof to him in speciall

¹ Filled full.

Above all other I am most holde.
 Forthy now in his daies olde,
 Thou shalt him telle this message
 That he upon his latter age
 To set an end of all his werke,
 As he, which is min owne clerke,
 Do make his Testament of Love."¹

Venus is perfectly plain-spoken in her parting address to her ancient follower. All this was written by 1392-93, at which time the poet was, beyond all doubt, between fifty and sixty, probably older. In 1397 (the inference from the registry is almost irresistible) the *old Amans married, spite of the warnings of Venus*. His eyesight was weak when the king suggested the 'Confessio Amantis' to him; and about 1400 he became, like Chaucer's January, blind from age. In 1408 he died, providing handsomely for his widow, as already intimated, directing his body to be buried in St. Mary Overy's, and leaving considerable sums (for those days) to churchmen, churches, and charities.

And having mentioned Chaucer's January, that "oldé blinde worthy knight," may the possibility be suggested that Gower furnished some traits of May's ancient husband, or perhaps sat for the portrait? There is indeed no evidence of this notion, beyond slight internal inferences, and a resemblance in point of age. While the few facts tell both ways, and the idea claims to be nothing more than a conjecture, still if Chaucer felt himself aggrieved by any slight which Gower's "timidity" or "selfishness" induced him to offer, coldness and estrangement might easily spring up between them and gradually grow into enmity. Certainly if Gower fancied he recognized a likeness of himself in the foolish old lover of the 'Marchaundes Tale,' there is sufficient to account for a quarrel. "Master Stratton" would be a mere *mauvaise plaisanterie* compared with January.

¹ A prose work of Chaucer.

But to return to the direct subject. Moral, as we have seen, was the distinctive characteristic which Chaucer applied to Gower while they were yet friends. Gower himself puts the same judgment into the mouth of Venus :

“ But go there vertue moral dwelleth,
Where ben thy bookés as men telleth.”

The word moral, however, does not seem quite to carry the modern meaning. Allowance being made for an unsophisticated age, the ‘*Confessio Amantis*’ is a moral and decorous work. But Chaucer probably used the word moral in an intellectual rather than an ethical sense. Had he been writing now, and critically instead of complimentarily, he might have called his friend the *moralizing* Gower. To search out the qualities of things in relation to inherent goodness or badness,—to estimate their effects upon the good or ill success of human affairs,—to apply the laws deducible from this inquiry to the conduct of individual life, and when laws fail to ensure success, to ponder over the power of fortune, and the instability of mundane things, were strong characteristics of Gower’s mind. The traits of the different virtues and vices, especially of the vices, have been so shrewdly observed and are so delicately marked, that they amount to genius. And, beyond all question, Gower contributed much to the moral philosophy of his country. But he was deficient in that living genius which brings man and nature before us as if alive again, and in that dramatic faculty which represents men, their feelings, and their passions, in storied action.

From this less living character of his matter, and the fewer transcripts of his own age which he presents to us, our earliest Kent poet is not likely again to excite the general interest that has ever attached to Chaucer; and which, should the taste for old English literature

continue to increase as it has done, may in some degree revive as to Piers Ploughman.

“ Yet is his name of high account,”

—if we may not add,

“ And still his verse has charms.”

But scarcely the most acquainted with mediæval times can now thoroughly appreciate the merits of Gower. He gave to an age, barren in refined popular literature, large stores of popular reading, and utilized it in a way which, if to us forced or pedantic, was then an approved fashion. His English style, if occasionally strained and obscure compared with more modern English, was then an improvement upon perhaps all that had preceded it, except the works of Chaucer and bits of some of the metrical romances. With the moving melody of ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso,’ and the vigour of Byron’s ‘Giaour’ dwelling in the memory, and with a relish somewhat palled by the “fatal facility” of the octosyllabic verses of Scott and his imitators, we can form no idea of the effect of the easy and tripping lines of the ‘Confessio Amantis’ upon a generation inured to halting metre and crabbed language. As little can we understand the great utility to his own generation, and even to later times, of that popularized learning which no one now would attempt to read without a purpose. But though Gower’s poetry has almost ceased to be read, he must always occupy a conspicuous place in the history of English literature. And so “we still have justice here.” As long as Gower pleased and profited he was praised and read. When he ceased to please or profit, men ceased to read him; but they have preserved his name in memory of the great services to English literature which he once rendered.