DIANE WATT. *AMORAL GOWER: LANGUAGE, SEX AND POLITICS* (MEDIEVAL CULTURES, 38.) UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 2003. PP. XVIII, 219.

In this learned and lucid study, Diane Watt provides a much needed reevaluation of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. She argues that Gower's reputation as a "moral" poet has prevented readers from seeing the ways in which the *Confessio* explores seemingly "modern" topics, including language, gender and sexuality and the politics and ethics of reading and writing. By "amoral," Watt does not mean that Gower lacks a political or ethical position. Rather, he refuses to impose his point of view on the reader, deliberately weaving tensions and contradictions into the fabric of the *Confessio*, thus demonstrating both the limits of ethical structures and the multiplicity of interpretations that his text (and all texts) elicits. Although often deemed didactic, Gower wants his audience to read individualistically, to experiment with meaning and to take interpretive risks (xii). Gower not only questions unified, stable ethical systems and interpretations, but also the idea of stable gender and sexuality, which "has a profound impact on Gower's treatment of ethics and politics, as well as language and rhetoric, and knowledge and power" (xii).

With a nod to Paul Strohm, Watt's introduction, "Social Gower," examines important contexts for understanding the *Confessio*, including Gower's background and literary circle, his literary reputation and the text's manuscript history. Perhaps most interesting, she demonstrates that not all audiences found Gower moral. Indeed, some fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writers shunned the *Confessio* because its stories of sexual transgression seemed *too immoral*. The text's complicated manuscript history makes it virtually impossible to identify a single authoritative version of the *Confessio*. This situation serves as a metaphor for the poem as a whole, which cannot be reduced to a single, authoritative reading given its complications and contradictions.

Rather than proceeding book by book, Watt organizes her study thematically into three parts: language, sex, and politics.

In her first chapter on language, she examines a number of the poem's Latin "gender-bending" jokes, which she argues undercut both Latin's status as a prestige language and the stability of accepted notions of gender and sexuality. In the second chapter, Watt argues that Gower, like his medieval and classical counterparts, links rhetorical excess with effeminacy, falsity, and sodomy. Gower hesitates to name Bruno Latini's *Tresor*

as his source for this discussion of language lest the Italian poet's association with sodomy taint him with its stigma, too. Accusations of effeminacy and sodomy also revolved around Richard II and his court as well, perhaps similarily motivating Gower to remove from later versions the scene in which Richard commissions the poem.

Although sodomy remains a taboo topic in the *Confessio*, Gower does not shy away from exploring other gender transgressions and sexual subversions. In her first chapter on sex in part two, Watt examines cross-dressing narratives in the poem. While male cross-dressing is depicted as a sign of effeminacy and vice, women who dress as men often are viewed as emblems of masculine virtue. As she notes in chapter four, Gower further subverts gender stereotypes through his description of Venus's birth, which calls into question both male and female boundaries. Like the cross-dressing narratives, Venus invites the reader to question the supposed "naturalness" of gender difference. Gower further disrupts gender stereotypes in his depiction of Philomela's rape. Rather than blaming women for sexual assault, Gower appears sympathetic to their plight, and presents such masculine aggressiveness as a sin of self-government.

In the first chapter on politics, Watt argues that evidence of Gower's conflicting political views exists even in those parts of the *Confessio* he did not revise. She notes that while Nebuchadnezzar suggests reform is possible, Gower's presentation of Alexander the Great is more conflicted and, in the end, more negative, perhaps reflecting his doubts about Richard's ability to reform. In the final chapter she reads the *Tale of Apollonius* as a political metaphor for the failure of self-control and its national ramifications. In Gower's version of the tale, mothers have an expanded and positive role. She also notes that homosocial desire between men gets mapped onto women's bodies in the form of sexual violence and the "trafficking in women." Watts concludes that if Apollonius is a model of kingship for Richard II (as a number of critics have argued), he is a decidedly negative one, since Apollonius's treatment of his daughter is not that much different from Antiochus'.

At times, Watt's effort to rehabilitate Gower's reputation as a moralizer leads to readings that leave me slightly uneasy. For example, in chapter four, Watts argues that although Gower condemns sexual violence and trickery, he is at times sympathetic with the perpetrators of it, suggesting a more

complicated view of sin and morality than has been recognized. Such is his treatment of Nectanabus, whose seduction leads to the birth of Alexander the Great, a tyrant, but someone who "has something of the divine about him." She suggests that from the conclusion of the tale, "it seems that the act of seduction or rape—the indulging of uncontrolled desires at the expense of the wishes of another—should not always be condemned out of hand, because it can result in some at least partial good for humankind as a whole" (102). Although undoubtedly it is not Watt's intention, here she comes uncomfortably close to transforming violence against women into something socially productive, inevitable, and even necessary.

Nonetheless, there is much to admire about *Amoral Gower*. Watt clearly demonstrates that the construction of "moral Gower" has severely limited our readings of the *Confessio Amantis*. In addition, she reveals the centrality of sexuality and gender, not just in the *Confessio*, but in late medieval culture more broadly. I also appreciate Watts's refusal to smooth over the various contradictions and disruptions that the poem—and her reading of it—produce. Watt describes her project as a "speculative reading" of the *Confessio* (17), one that she hopes will "engage[s] more readers, and thus stimulate[s] more interpretations" (xv). She has certainly created such a study, one that will undoubtedly result in new and fresh readings of Gower's work in the years to come.

DIANE MARIE CADY
ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY