A comparison of two medieval story-tellers: Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower

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A COMPARISON OF TWO MEDIEVAL STORY-TELLERS:
GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND JOHN GOWER

A Thesis
Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts.

by
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CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHAUCER AND GOWER

The purpose of this study is to compare the narrative and framing techniques used by Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower. These authors were selected for several reasons. Being contemporaries, they lived through the days of the reign of Richard II, his deposition, and the accession of Henry IV. This was a time of change: the age of chivalry and true knighthood was ending; the middle class was establishing commerce, towns, guilds; openly and violently the peasants were beginning to reject their servile positions; the corruption within the organized church was being publicly exposed, and efforts, believed heretical by some, were being made to effect its purification.

Gower and Chaucer were both educated men. The sources of their tales and the allusions within them are evidence of acquaintance with classical and contemporary literature. They also chose to use metric and stanzaic forms which show a non-English literary influence.

Chaucer and Gower were the medieval versions of the Anglo-Saxon soon; they devoted their leisure time to writing, and presumably reading aloud, stories for the entertainment and enlightenment of the English court. Their having such an audience promoted the use of the London dialect and also
implied that a certain dignity and attitude of respect toward the aristocracy could be expected in their work.

Gower and Chaucer were acquaintances. Chaucer appointed Gower and one other person to act for him under a general power of attorney during his second Italian journey in May of 1378. That they were aware of one another's poetry is shown by the fact that each mentions the other. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is directed to Gower and Strode for their correction. In Book V, lines 1856-1859 read:

> O moral Gower, this book I directe
> To the and to the, philosophical Strode,
> To vouchen sauf, ther nede is, to correcte,
> Of your benignities and zeles goode.¹

Mr. Malone is without doubt correct in asserting that in this instance "the compliment is the main thing" and that "it seems altogether unlikely that Gower and Strode actually did any correcting, or were expected to do any."²

Gower placed the following friendly greeting to Chaucer in the original version of the *Confessio Amantis*.

As Venus takes leave of the poet, Gower, she says:

> "Adieu, for I mot fro the wende.
> And gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete,
> As mi disciple and mi poete:
> For in the floures of his youthe


In sondri wise, as he wel couthe,
Of Ditees and of songes glade,
The whiche he for mi sake made,
The lond fulfild is overal:
Wherof to him in special
Above alle othre I am most holde.
For thi now in hise daies olde
Thow schalt him telle this message,
That he upon his later age,
To sette an ende of alle his werk,
As he which is myn owne clerk,
Do make his testament of love,
As thou hast do thei schrifte above,
So that mi Court it mai recorde."

(Liber Octavus, 2940 ff.)

This evidence of acquaintance, as well as the close association inferred by their relationships to the court, has led critics to consider these two as friends. In a later version of the Confessio this reference to Chaucer was omitted. This omission has led to the presumption, by some, that the authors' friendship was interrupted by a bitter literary rivalry. This subject leads to a number of interesting speculations, but a discussion will be omitted here as irrelevant.

The discussion in this paper will be limited to the major work of each author. For Gower this is the Confessio Amantis, his only English work of any length; for Chaucer it is the Canterbury Tales, which, incomplete as it is, is generally accepted as the crown jewel of medieval English

literature. The discussion will be limited further to the
framing and linking devices and to the four tales which
appear in both books: "Constance" (Man of Law's tale),
"Florent" (Wife of Bath's tale), "Phæbus and Cornide"
(Manciple's tale), and "Virginia" (Physician's tale).

The books as a whole and the frames will be discussed
in Chapter II. Each of the next four chapters will be con-
cerned with one of the four tales and will follow this
general outline: the origin of the tale, the purpose or
moral of the tale, the relationship of the tale to the total
work, the differences and similarities between these tales
and the original versions as well as between each other, and
the artistic effects of any changes made by Chaucer or Gower.

The following abbreviations appear in the text of the
paper: MLT for Man of Law's Tale, WBT for Wife of Bath's Tale,
WBP for Wife of Bath's Prologue, and PhT for Physician's Tale.
CHAPTER II

THE CONFESSIO AMANTIS AND THE CANTERBURY TALES

The Confessio Amantis and the Canterbury Tales were selected as sources for the tales to be compared in this paper for several reasons. First, as previously stated, each book is the outstanding production by its author. The second reason is that both were written within a ten-year period. Third, these collections of tales are similar in that they are preceded by a prologue which provides not only a setting for the tales but also a plausible reason for their telling. The tales are also interrelated by linking devices which make the collection a whole, not a group of small parts. These devices, known as a frame, will be the subject of this chapter.

The description of a frame given by W. H. Clawson can apply to both the Canterbury Tales and to the Confessio Amantis, although one may wonder whether the human comedy portrayed in Chaucer's frame and the moral lessons given by Gower's Confessor were not more important to the authors

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4 A framework or framing story is to be understood as a narrative which, however interesting in itself, was composed for the primary purpose of introducing and connecting a series of tales which are the raison d'être of the whole work. W. H. Clawson, "The Framework of the Canterbury Tales" reprinted in E. C. Wagenknecht, Chaucer, Modern Essays in Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 3.
than the tales themselves. The approaches to the frame and the purposes for the books illustrated by these two works are totally different. In Chaucer's series, the tales are related by members of a social group for the purposes of entertainment. Gower's tales are grouped as illustrations of moral truths expounded in the frame.

A number of the devices used by Chaucer in his General Prologue and in the links between stories were not original. Similarities have been found in Boccaccio's Decameron, Ameto, and Filocolo and in Sercambi's Novelle based on the now lost Novelliero (1374). There are, however, more differences than similarities between the Canterbury Tales and any of the works mentioned above. It should also be pointed out that Chaucer mentions neither Boccaccio nor Sercambi nor any of their works and that there are no verbal parallels to be found when the same tale is told by both Chaucer and Boccaccio or Sercambi; any influence by either

5 Clawson finds four distinct similarities between Chaucer's Tales and Boccaccio's works:

"The tales are told in succession by members of an organized group; the group is brought together by special external circumstances; there are narrative and conversational links between the tales; there is a presiding officer." Clawson, op. cit., p. 6.

The similarities between the Tales and Sercambi's Novelle are the variety of classes and professions represented by the travelers, the leader, Alusi, who is in charge of all good, lodging, and entertainment, and the presence of Sercambi himself as a traveler.
man on Chaucer is only scholarly supposition.

Probably more important than any possible similarities between Chaucer and his predecessors are the dissimilarities. The sources for the most valued Chaucerian devices (the brilliant descriptions, the sharp interchanges between characters, and the idea of the religious pilgrimage) are obscure. While descriptions of pilgrims can be found in Roman poetry and in medieval verses in Latin, French, and English, they are usually unrealistic and merely extol the beauty and virtue of the upper classes. There is no example in early literature for such descriptions as Chaucer's and no example for his realistic detail and subtle criticisms.

There also is no preceding example for the use of the religious pilgrimage as an occasion for the telling of stories, and this is termed by Clawson:

... one of the happiest devices of Chaucer's 
Canterbury Tales. The religious motive of a pilgrimage made possible [and logical] the coming together on a friendly footing of representatives of many social classes; and the relative safety and cheapness of such a form of travel, especially to so famous and long-established a shrine as Canterbury, promoted a holiday spirit which encouraged music and story-telling and led to the free exchange of opinions and confidences. Thus through his adoption of the pilgrimage device Chaucer was enabled to make of his General Prologue an unsurpassed social document and of his framing narrative a true human comedy.6

Chaucer may have chosen a pilgrimage because, as he implies, he had been on one and the idea appealed to him or

because he had seen many pilgrimages going to Canterbury during his years in Kent. For whatever reason, Chaucer, the man of the world, developed the pilgrimage beyond the classical picture of humble Christians seeking absolution; he added the vagaries and waywardnesses of people.

Because Gower's *Confessio Amantis* follows the second pattern of narrative settings for tales, little comparison of the actual matter of the frame can be made with Chaucer's. The idea of combining stories within a framework in order to illustrate moral truths appears to have an Oriental origin since the form can be traced to the ancient Indian culture. However, both translations and original examples were available to medieval writers.7 Schofield has pointed out that "a desire clearly manifest in the Middle Ages was to have all knowledge and all material of uplifting import and literary entertainment accessible in compact form."8

The *Disciplina Clericalis* and the *Fables of Bidpai* were available to the medieval reader; in both, Clawson says, "moral precepts are imparted to a pupil by a wise

7 The thirteenth-century *Directorium Vitae Humane* was John of Capura's translation of the Panchatantra. Both the *Roman des Sept Sages* and the *Thousand and One Nights* have Oriental origins, and the *Weseare Papyrus* has been traced to ancient Egypt. Medieval books of this type were *Vita Parlaam et Josanhat*, *Disciplina Clericalis*, and Chaucer's incomplete *Legend of Good Women*.

teacher, and are illustrated by a series of tales." Gower's Confessio is similar in effect to these but is rather more ingenious than either of them. As Clawson points out, "[Gower's] framework is based on a skillful combination of two allegorical themes, the seven deadly sins and courtly love."10

It was quite common to find stories grouped around the seven sins. In the Confessio, however, these sins are against the god of love. Each vice is explained by the confessor, and then, writes Macaulay:

A special application [of the vice] is made to the case of love, and the stories illustrate either the general definition or the special application, or both, no very clear line being drawn in many cases between the two.11

Macaulay continues:

[Gower] has made the confession into a framework which will conveniently hold any number of stories upon every possible subject, and at the same time has preserved for the most part the due propriety of character and situation in the two actors. . . . It must be admitted also that the general plan of the poem shows distinct originality.12

Ward has summarized Gower's frame in the following way:

9Clawson, op. cit., p. 4.
10Ibid.
12Ibid., p. 172.
The poet, wandering about in a forest, while suffering under the smart of Cupid's dart, meets Venus, the Goddess of Love, who urges him, as one on the point of death, to make his full confession to her clerk or priest, the holy Father Genius. The confession hereupon takes place by means of question and answer; both penitent and confessor entering at great length into an examination of the various sins and weaknesses of human nature, and of their remedies, and illustrating their observations by narratives, brief or elaborate, from Holy Writ, sacred legend, ancient history, and romantic story.

This carefully planned frame calls for a very precise formula; unfortunately this is marred by a number of digressions, both major and minor, into irrelevant material on the part of the confessor.

While all of the stories in the Confessio Amantis are introduced as illustrations or examples, it is apparent that the original limitations of the exemplum have been disregarded. Although Gower frequently uses the terms ensample and exemplum in the text and in the marginal notes, he, like

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13 Macaulay feels that "the idea of the confession was no doubt taken from the Roman de la Rose, where the priest of Nature, whose name is also Genius, hears her [Nature's] confession; but [that] it must be allowed that Gower has made much better use of it." Gower, The Complete Works, I, xi.

14 All of the tales are told by the confessor.


16 Snell says that "in many instances, Gower ignores the true moral [of a tale] and drags in an application which does not tally." Snell uses this weakness as an excuse for ignoring the frame and discussing only the stories. Frederick W. Snell, The Fourteenth Century (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), p. 323.
other medieval writers, has expanded the meaning of the word to include secular, animal, and magical tales. Mosher explains that:

Medieval clerics had furnished a body of narratives fitted to moral and ecclesiastical rules and regulations, the poets and scholars had provided a fund of tales which were not badly adapted to illustrate an erotic structure. The latter form the body of the Confessio, while monkish stories are almost wholly absent. None of the four selected for discussion in this paper even resembles a true exemplum. In form, however, there is much to recall the type. The tales are uniformly introduced by a statement that Confessor is to tell a tale, or "ensample," of envy, pride, humility, or whatever vice or virtue is under discussion.

Macaulay points out that "no previous writer either in English or in any other modern language, had versified so large and various a collection of stories, or had devised so ingenious and elaborate a scheme of combinations." As in Chaucer's story collections, the stories within Gower's

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17 These tales were available in what were called example-books. Schofield says:

"The example books, indeed, exerted a pervasive influence on all sorts of medieval writers. Even Chaucer could not resist the temptation to cite 'ensamples' repeatedly in support of his views. It was well enough for him to indulge the Pardoner in this practice, for he thus the better illustrated the methods of the common sermonizer. But elsewhere he had no such good excuse." Schofield, op. cit., p. 342.

18 Mosher also points out that Gower united the two by adapting "the vice and virtue idea to the realm of love." Joseph Albert Mosher, The Exemplum in England (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1911), p. 125.

19 Ibid.

20 Macaulay, CHEL, II, 173.
frame are not original. They come from a variety of sources including Ovid, Livy, the Bible, Valerius Maximus, Statius, Benoit de Sainte More, Guido delle Colonne, Godfrey of Viterbo, Bruenetto Latini, Nicholas Trivet, the Roman des Sept Sages, Vita Barlaam et Josaphat, and Historia Alexandri.

Possible sources of the confessor and the idea of a confession, of didactic material illustrated by a wise man, and of the sources for Gower's stories have been discussed in the preceding paragraphs. No mention, however, has been made as to why he has adapted his entire scheme to the subject of love, a subject not immediately to be associated with the author of Miroir de l'Omme and Vox Clamantis, though perhaps more with the author of the "Cinkante Ballads," the subject of which is love in all its forms. Love is a convenient framework since there are so many stories available and since it would appeal to the people. This appeal can be seen in the popularity of the courtly romances, although the people really preferred these because of the action rather than the sentiment. It is obvious that Gower understood this preference, too, because his tales are tales of action and the sentiment is restricted primarily to the unrequited love of the poet-hero. Also there is no reason to believe that while Gower wanted to teach all who would learn, he did not also secretly yearn to be as well known among the common people as among the aristocrats. A Lover's Confessions is a title that would attract attention almost
everywhere, and Gower did choose to write this series of stories in the vernacular.

The stories in the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Canterbury Tales* vary greatly as to origin, subject matter, the purpose of their inclusion in the collection, and their length. These tales fit the framework and the tellers with varying degrees of accuracy. In some instances the tale seems to be present only because the author liked it; in other instances it is the perfect choice to show the character of the teller or to fit into the scene presented by the frame.
Constance's history is long but relatively well known. The reader anxiously follows the heroine through one extremely unfortunate event after another and sighs in relief when she is finally rewarded for her faith and fortitude. It is only when the reader has completed the tale and begins to think about it that he really becomes aware of the author's manipulation of events which produces the incredible coincidences with which the tale abounds.

The story of Constance probably originated as a folk tale and has been disguised by many layers of Christian overtones. Many of the elements in "The Constance Story," the persecuted princess, the evil mother-in-law, the maligned wife, the accusation of a monstrous birth, the mother and child cast adrift in an open boat, and the prolonged separations terminated by sudden revelations are the stock in trade of the folk tale. Parallelism or the repetition of events is equally familiar.

"The Constance Story" seems particularly close to the Breton lai of Emare, which is probably the ultimate source for the tale. Here a magical, steerless ship brings Emare,

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21 Schofield, op. cit., p. 189.
22 Ibid., pp. 189-91.
a fee of unearthly beauty, dressed in radiant clothing, to the shores of Galicia (supposed to be in England), where she marries the king. The mother-in-law objects because she is not mortal. Their separation apparently occurred because the king persisted in making a request which Emaré had forbidden him to make.

When Nicholas Trivet rewrote the story for his Anglo-Norman chronicles, he endowed it with the many elaborate pseudo-historical and religious trappings which tend to obscure the qualities which represented his ultimate source. In the first place he took great pains to give the tale validity. Although quite inaccurate in his details, he did use actual people for his minor characters—Tiberius, Constantine, and Maurice, emperors of Rome, and Alla, an English king. The classical setting gave a tone of solemn seriousness that could never have been achieved with an English setting. Nevertheless, the main events, those concerning Constance and Alla, still occur on English soil.

Since Trivet wanted his story to be pious, he also created a new beginning. To do this he used a standard element of folk stories, repetition, and invented the marriage to the heathen sultan and the first evil mother-in-law. His emphasis on the Christianity of Constance led directly to her conversion of the foreign merchants. They, in turn, were called in to explain their change in faith to
the sultan, who immediately decided he must marry this girl, even though he and his followers must first become converts. Trivet's Constance agrees to marry him in order to help the Christian cause. It is this series of conversions that spurs the evil mother, loyal to her faith, to commit the well-known atrocities at the wedding feast. In this manner Trivet gave the living Constance the aura of a martyr. While the repetition of exiles and wicked mothers-in-law is awkward, it does successfully camouflage the supernatural qualities involved in the arrival of Emare, and at the same time it does eliminate, with equal success, the beginning used in several early versions in which Constance goes to England to escape an incestuous marriage with her father.\(^{23}\) For Trivet's purposes this would have been as distasteful as was the fairy version.

After Constance's arrival in England, Trivet delayed her meeting with the king long enough to explain the present state of Christianity in England and to insert several standard miracles. While the king is not present when Constance is publicly cleared, by the hand of God Himself, of guilt in the murder of Hermingeld, such an occurrence greatly affects him. He is converted and then marries

Constance for her goodness and beauty. ²⁴

Again the king's mother dislikes the bride, and again her complaint is based on the change in the state religion. In her plot to destroy Constance and her influence, she reverts to the folk-tale complaint that the bride is a fairy and adds the standard proof—that she has given birth to a monster. ²⁵ Donegild's second letter provides carefully and neatly for the long separation of the lovers, but the original reason was not removed. Schofield wrote:

Kings and queens of the other world, when they entered into relations with mortals, established a sort of taboo. There was always a question that must not be asked, a revelation that must not be made. Violation of the command meant separation of the lovers. ²⁶

Such was the case with Constance and Alla. Under no circumstances would she tell him who she was or where she came from.

While the rescue of the mother and son by the Roman

²⁴ While Constance is no longer a fairy, even as late as Chaucer's work she still retains enough of her magical powers that "alle hir loven that looken in hir face." l. 532.

²⁵ Chaucer, too, retained this folk element:

... the queene delivered was
Of so horrible a feendly creature
That in the castel noon so hardy was
That any while dorste ther endure.
The mooode was an elf, by aventure
Yoonen, by charmes or by sorcerie,
And every wight hateth hir compaignye.

(MLT, 750 ff.)

fleet returning from a war of vengeance which was instigated by the presumed death of Constance at the hands of the sultaness is incredible, it is no more so than the survival of a lone woman on the stormy seas for long periods of time. Constance, regardless of the situation, relied solely and unwaveringly on her Christian faith. In return, God never failed to protect her. She was saved from the sultaness, from the salty seas, and from the would-be seducer. It is, in the end, because of the faith that she and Alla are reunited; his newly acquired Christian conscience sends him on a pilgrimage to the Pope in Rome, where Constance is living. Constance has become the allegorical figure of fortitude, and the joyous reunion with her husband is a sign that such constant faithfulness will be rewarded.

Trivet concludes with more attempts to give his tale historical veracity. He adds endless details of the deaths and burial places of all persons involved. His tale, written in a now archaic Anglo-Norman prose, is loosely organized and contains many religious and historical digressions and actions which are unrelated to Constance.\(^{27}\) It is strictly a narrative designed to make his didactic message on fortitude more palatable to the young novice for whom

\(^{27}\) For example, he describes how the populace, who loved Constance, reviled the unsuspecting Alla as he returned from the war.
it was written. Emotional depths and reality of action are lacking. The characters do not seem human; they appear as shadows acting in an allegorical drama.

The next step in the development of the Constance story was probably taken by John Gower. There is some divergence of opinion as to whether Gower or Chaucer was the next to use the tale, but the internal evidence seems to indicate that Gower preceded Chaucer. The first copy of the *Confessio* was completed in 1390. Basing his theory on the stanzaic pattern and the subject, Root has given Chaucer's tale of Constance an early date, about 1387.\(^{28}\) Robinson, however, feels that some of the allusions in the poem and the fact that it is not mentioned in an early list of Chaucer's poems warrant a later date, about 1390.\(^{29}\) Edward Block, too, feels that Chaucer wrote after Gower and that he used not only Trivet but also Gower as his source. Chaucer, he adds, used incidents which are found only in Gower's version, and while there is never a verbal borrowing from Trivet, he cites a number of such from Gower.\(^{30}\) For example, both Gower and Chaucer speak of the ship as "steerless" while Trivet says

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\(^{29}\)Chaucer, *op. cit.*, p. 692.

"without sail or oar."

It is apparent that Gower has not borrowed from Chaucer. In the first place, Gower usually follows one source (Trivet in this instance), and all variations from the original are his own. In the second place, none of the rich emotional scenes, the narrator's apostrophes, or the changes in the order of the events which are found in Chaucer are found in Gower, and no one can imagine Gower, whose main asset was his eye for a good story, allowing such improvements to go unused if they were available to him.

The best reasons for dating Chaucer's work after Gower's are the allusions made both in the introduction and the tale as Chaucer wrote them. Gower, however, is never actually named. In the introduction, which was possibly written much later than the tale,31 the Man of Law catalogues Chaucer's writings and adds:

But certeinly no word no writeth he
Of thilke wikke ensample of Canace,  
That loved hir owene brother synfully;  
(Of swiche cursed stories I sey fy!)  
Or elles of Tyro Appollonius,  
How that the cursed kyng Antiochus  
Birafte his doghter of hir maydenhede,  
That is so horrible a tale for to rede,  
Whan he hir threw upon the pavement,  
And therfore he, of ful avysement,

31 Speirs says the introduction of the Man of Law by the host is in Chaucer's most mature manner but "'the Man of Law's Tale'. . . reads like an earlier work which Chaucer has perhaps fitted into the Canterbury conception with little alteration." John Hastie Speirs, Chaucer the Maker (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 133-34.
Both of these were well known tales, and Gower used them in his Confessio. He is even forced into the unenviable position of condoning the actions of Canacee in order to condemn the king, her father. However, the objectionable incident ascribed to the Apollonius tale is not present in Gower's version, which may or may not nullify the generally accepted theory that Chaucer intended this passage as a fling at Gower.

Twice within the body of the tale Chaucer remarks that "some men wold seyn . . ." where he is referring to another version of the tale. The first instance refers to Constance's request that the senator take her son to the feast honoring Alla; this Chaucer seems to accept as logical. He does not, however, accept the second instance, in which some say that Maurice was sent to invite the Emperor, for no one would send a child on such a mission. Both Trivet and Gower send Maurice. In Trivet's version he is a young man of eighteen, not a child, and Gower says he was sent because his resemblance to his mother is such that the yet mourning emperor will not be able to refuse the invitation. Again it is impossible to determine whether or not Chaucer's
remark is actually a reference to Gower's story.\textsuperscript{32}

The tales of Virginia, Florent, and even Phebus as told by Gower compare quite favorably with the Chaucerian versions. This is not the case with the Constance story. Here, as in none of the others, Chaucer's overall superiority is so apparent that Gower's tale is reduced to the stature of a rough sketch which a greater artist might later use in producing a masterpiece.

Nevertheless this should not reduce the value of the improvements Gower made. Perhaps they showed Chaucer the greater possibilities in a tale he had previously ignored. Gower's first and most obvious change was in form and language. His precise octosyllabic couplets as well as his native English replaced the Anglo-Norman prose. Although he may have intended a mere translation, Gower made of it an extremely tidy tale. The boring historical details, the catalogue effect of Trivet's dates, times, and exact numbers, are reduced to a minimum while incidents that in no way

\textsuperscript{32}Chaucer, in the Wife of Bath's Tale, uses the same remark.

Nowe wolden som men seye, paraventure,
That for my negligence I do no cure
To tellen you the joy and al th'array
That at the feeste was that ilke day.
To which thyng shortly answeren I shal:
I seye ther nas no joye ne feeste at al;
Ther nas but hevynesse and muche sorwe.

(WBT, 1073 ff.)
affect the heroine are completely eliminated. At the same time Gower retained the main events as he found them.

While little or no praise can be lavished on his version, the changes inaugurated by Gower were actually fundamental in nature, and he has produced the earliest form that is at least palatable to modern taste. Gower's shortened rendition was quite possibly used as a form upon which Chaucer draped his own additions. These latter have changed the now familiar tale almost as much as did Trivet's version. Although the events themselves are basically unchanged, they are endowed with a new richness, as when a pauper is magically transformed into a prince.

Following Gower's example Chaucer continued pruning away the dead wood in the story. Some events he eliminated; some he condensed. He further reduced the number of details concerning time, place, and historical setting; he telescoped the period during which the action took place. This does not mean that Chaucer's work appears to be clipped or curt, for he made so many additions that his story is even longer than Trivet's.33

Chaucer's additions fall into a number of categories. The most important to the tale itself are those involving changes in the order of events and in the humanizing of the

33Block, *op. cit.*, p. 574. By actual count Trivet used 7,532 words and Chaucer used 7,851. (Since Trivet's account is in prose, a line count would have little meaning.)
characters. The two significant changes in order are concerned with King Alla. For the first time he is present when Elda discovers his murdered wife and when Constance is exonerated by divine revelation. He is permitted to see rather than to hear of this miracle. Alla is thus actively introduced in preparation for the major role he is to play in Constance's immediate future.

The second change involves the time at which the author introduces given material. In both Trivet and Gower no mention is made of Alla after the second exile of Constance until she has been dwelling in Rome for a number of years. Chaucer narrates his story with more chronological accuracy by following the exile episode with the details of Alla's return, his sorrow, his discovery of the treachery, and his punishment of his own mother. Thus Chaucer neatly disposes of all the loose ends of the English episode before changing his setting to Rome.

The most frequently mentioned improvement in Chaucer's tale is the humanization of his characters. That he thought of them as people enduring unendurable hardships and that his heart went out to them with unaffected pity and sympathetic understanding help to place them above their roles as
actors in an allegorical drama.  

Root finds that the character of Constance is "utterly transparent, utterly perfect" and that "a high degree of spiritual unity" is added because she is always the same, "unmoved" and basically "unshaken." He sees Constance, the personification of Christianity, as a shadowy character because she has lost her individual "idiosyncrasies" which would be "blemishes" in the perfect person.  

While this description might be true of Gower's Constance, it seems rather inappropriate for Chaucer's. On numerous occasions he probes beneath this superhuman perfection and reveals a warm and normal young woman.  

If this were a drama, Constance would have four very emotional scenes: the Roman departure, the judgment, the Northumbrian exile, and the final recognitions and revelation of her true identity.  

For any young girl preparing for marriage to a man  

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34 When Gower rewrote Trivet's wooden tale, he began the process of humanizing the characters, but he did not carry this innovation very far. Schaar feels that Gower "occupies an intermediary position between Trivet and Chaucer." Gower's Constance swoons, kneels, prays, weeps. When she hears Alla is coming to Rome, she grows pale, swoons, sighs, and attributes her behaviour to sea-sickness. Schaar also points out that Constance's father weeps and kisses her, although for the most part he feels that Gower treats pure feelings rather "laconically." Claes Schaar, The Golden Mirror: Studies in Chaucer's Descriptive Technique and its Literary Background (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1955), pp. 68-69.  

she has never met, a man who lives in a foreign country and worships a heathen god, there must be terrible moments of fear for the future and of sadness for the life she is leaving. An expression of such feelings would seem natural, but to Trivet Constance goes more than willingly, sustained by her Christian missionary zeal. Gower seems equally oblivious of the human emotions which would arise from such a situation. The marriage was arranged between the Syrian sultan and the Roman emperor, and Gower wrote:

Thei ben on either side acorded,
And therupon to make an ende
The Soullan hise hostages sende
To Rome, of Princes Sones twelue:
Wherof the fader in himselve
Was glad, and with the Pape avised
Tuo Cardinals he hath assised
With othre lordes many mo,
That with his doghter scholden go,
To see the Soullan be converted.
(Book II, 630 ff.)

And that was that!

Chaucer could not dismiss the situation in such a cold, dispassionate, and unobserving manner. In his version the king arranges to send his daughter to this strange land with an entourage suitable for a princess; the citizens in general become involved as they pray for a safe voyage and a happy marriage: Constance herself appears not as a self-sacrificing martyr but as a very frightened young woman. She is pale; she weeps both from self-pity because she is to live where she has no friends and from fear of a man about
whom she knows nothing; she bids her parents a sad farewell, prays to the Christ, and complains about woman's lot in life. The omens of evil cast a dismal and foreboding pall over what should be a time for joy, hope, and serenity. The latter, of course, prepares the reader for the fulfillment of those astrologically predicted calamities.

Perhaps it was only a sign of the times that the happiness of Constance was a matter of concern to no one in her family and to neither Trivet nor Gower. And even Chaucer, who emphasizes her emotional display, ignores the idea that there is any real need for her to be happy; apparently this was a matter of no great import in the world of men and politics.

At the judgment, which is the second of the emotional scenes, the king is filled with compassion for this innocent lamb, and, despite the knight's accusations, the people are mournful and disbelieving. Constance hereself may have been "unshaken" as she prayed to Immortal God for deliverance, but the impression given by Chaucer is that she was terrified. She had no friends and no champion. In one of his most striking vignettes, Chaucer wrote:

Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face,
Among a prees, of hym that hath be lad
Toward his deeth, wheras hym gat no grace,
And swich a colour in his face hath had,
Men myghte knowe his face that was bisted,
Amonges alle the faces in that route?
So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute...

(MLT, 645 ff.)
The Northumbrian exile is perhaps the most powerful scene in the entire narrative. The gradual development of character is quite obvious when the three versions are examined. Trivet seems to be concerned only with stating the facts about the incident, and he states them almost without feeling. For example, Constance appears to be more or less undisturbed as she utters this brief but pious prayer:

Ja ne veigne ceo iour qe pur mey la terre feust destrute e que pur moy mes chers amiz eusez mort ou moleste. Mes puis que a dieu ples e a mon seignur, le rois, moun exil, a bon gree le doys prendre, en experaunce qe dur comencement amene a dieux a bon fyn, e qil me porra en la meer sauver qi en meer e en terre est de toute pusaunce.  

Gower mirrors the cruelty of the banishment in the plight of the baby and in a forsaken woman's compassion for her child. Its preservation, with God's help, is her only reason to continue in this life:

Upon the See thei have hire broght, Bot sche the cause wiste noght, And thus upon the flod thei won, This ladi with hire yonge Sone: And thanne hire handes to the hevene Sche strawhte, and with a milde stevene Knelende upon hire bare kne Sche seide, "O hihe mageste, Which sest the point of every trowthe Tak of thi wofull womman rowthe And of this child that I schal kepe." And with that word sche gan to wepe, Swounende as ded, and ther sche lay: Bot he whiche alle things may Conforteth hir, and ate laste

36 Nicholas Trivet in Schlauch, op. cit., pp. 174-75.
Sche loketh and hire yhen caste
Upon hire child and seide this:
"Of me no maner charge it is
What sorwe I soffre, bot of thee
Me thinkth it is a gret pite,
For if I sterve thou schalt delie:
So mot I nedes be that weie
For Moderhed and for tendernesse
With al myn hole besinesse
Ordeigne me for thilke office,
As sche which schal be thi Norrice."
Thus was sche strengthened finto-stonde
And yaf it sowke, and evere among
Wohe wepte, and otherwhile song
to rokke with hire child aslepe:
And thus hire ogne child to kepe
Sche hath under the goddes cure.
(Book II, 1051 ff.)

Chaucer too saw reality in the situation, but he made
Constance the embodiment of a series of natural feminine
actions and reactions that vary from fearfulness to accept­
tance of Providence, from the meekness of prayer and the
gentleness of motherly love to the bitterness of her fare­
well to Alla:

And Custance, with a deedly pale face,
The ferthe day toward hir ship she wente.
But natheless she taketh in good entente
The wyl of Crist, and knelynge on the stronde,
She sayde, "Lord, ay welcome be thy sonde!"

He that me kepte fro the false blame
While I was on the lond amonges yow,
He kan me kepe from harm and eek fro shame
In salte see, although I se noght how.
As strong as evere he was, he is yet now.
In hym triste I, and in his mooder deere,
That is to me my seyl and eek my steere.

Hir litel child ley wepyng in hir arm,
And knelynge, pitously to hym she seyde,
"Pees, litel sone, I wol do thee noon harm"
With that hir coverchief of her heed she breyde.
And over his litel eyen she it leyde,
And in hir arm she lulleth it ful faste,
And into hevene hire eyen up she caste.

"Mooder," quod she, "and maybe bright, Marie,
Sooth is that thurgh wommanes ageement
Mankynde was lorn, and damned ay to dye,
For which thy child was on a croyes yrent.
Thy blissful eyen sawe al his torment;
Thanne is ther no comparison bitwene
Thy wo and any wo man may sustene.

"Thow sawe thy child yslayn before thyne yen,
And yet now lyneth my litel child, parfay!
Now, lady bright, to whom alle woful cryen,
Thow glorie of wommanhede, thow faire may,
Thow haven of refut, brighte sterre of day,
Hewe on my child, that of thy gentillesse,
Hewe on my child, that of thy gentillesse,
Reste on every reweful in distresse.

"O litel child, alas! what is thy gilt,
That nevere wroghtest synne as yet, pardee?
Why wel thy harde fader han thee spilt?
O mercy, deere constable," quod she,
"As lat my litel child dwelle heir with thee;
And if thou darst nat saven hym for blame,
So kys hym ones in his fadres name!"

Therwith she looked backward to the londe,
And seyde, "farewel, housbonde routhelesse!"
And up she rist, and walketh doun the stronde
Toward the ship,—.. .
And were she preyeth hire child to holde his pees;
And taketh hir leve, and with an hooly entente
She blisseth hire, and into ship she wente.
(MLT, 821 ff.)

Although Chaucer's Constance exhibits a wider range
of thought, she is concerned primarily, as in Gower's ver-
sion, with her child. Chaucer's Constance herself appears
more composed than Gower's, but it must be noted that all
of the action in Chaucer's version takes place on the beach
while Constance is beset by a weeping crowd. No mention is
made of her behavior once she is aboard the ship. Gower's
heroine, though unable to imagine the cause of her exile, apparently walked calmly and sedately past her weeping and woeful subjects and maintained appearances until she was alone.

The fourth scene actually has two parts—the reconciliation of the lovers and the final revelation of identity. Gower tells us that the senator returned with the news that the great King Alla was coming to Rome. This information had a sudden effect upon his guest; she turned pale and fainted (a truly romantic touch). In order to disguise her conduct Constance unconvincingly declares her trouble to be a return of seasickness though she has been safe from the sea for twelve years. Gower tells us, though, that her heart was full of joy at the possibility that God was going to reunite her with her beloved.

When Alla sees young Maurice at the feast, he is unable to restrain his curiosity about the child or to suppress his desire to meet the child's mother. Gower appears to be more concerned with Alla's emotional dilemma than he is with Constance's feelings. He is perhaps trying to re-emphasize to his audience that Alla as well as Constance is in need of their pity and understanding, for he too has suffered greatly. When Constance appears before Alla, there are no recriminations, no tears, no hesitations; he simply sweeps her into his arms and kisses her.

Chaucer, as usual, took a different view of the
situation. Alla's pilgrimage to Rome becomes a matter of general knowledge, but the only clue Chaucer gives as to Constance's reaction was that her son, perhaps at her request, was sent to a feast given in Alla's honor. This simple action, however, betrays the hope and love that yet dwelt in her heart. Alla sees the obvious resemblance between Maurice and his lost wife, and he accompanies the senator to his home. A messenger is sent for Constance. Her dream has come true; Alla is waiting to see her. However, doubts now assail her. As she remembers the past, she becomes fearful; she is reduced to a state of dumbness and is almost deprived of her ability to stand; she faints, not once but twice. Alla can do nothing but weep and attempt to soften her bitterness with an explanation of the true situation and a confession of his personal sorrow. Soothed at last, the lovers are united as lovers should be, by a kiss.

Not only has Chaucer added variety to the emotions of his heroine (shocked reaction and loving reconciliation are expanded to include hope, fear, bitter remembrance, and finally love and acceptance), but he has also seen realistically into the heart of Constance. Few women could accept involuntary exile without at least an explanation, and it is quite probable that bitterness amounting to hatred would have developed during the years. Gower's Constance does not seem at all natural when she responds to Alla with saintly
tranquility and forgetfulness.

There is one more revelation: Constance has yet to make herself known to her father and to reveal her true identity to her husband. Gower narrates this incident simply and effectively. In response to Constance's wishes, Alla plans a feast in the emperor's honor and sends his son to request the emperor's attendance. He accepts. When the lords and ladies ride out to meet and escort their emperor, Constance begs the privilege or riding forward and of being the first to greet him:

"Mi lord, mi fader, wel you be!
And of this time that I se
Youre honour and your goode hele,
Which is the helpe of my querele,
I thinke unto the goddes myht,"

(Book II, 1513 ff.)

Afterwards she told him of things that only he and his daughter would remember, so that he would know she was truly his Constance. The old man, who had been in mourning since his daughter first left him, wept and kissed her and was almost overcome by his joy. It seemed that she had returned from the grave.

Chaucer followed the same general pattern, though his reduction of the time span forced Alla to carry his own invitation, since Maurice was far too young for such an important task. The main difference is in the outburst accompanying Constance's revelation of herself. In this version she dismounts, throws herself at her father's feet,
and cries:

"Fader," quod she, "youre younge child Custance
Is now ful clene out of youre remembrance.

"I am youre doghter Custance," quod she,
"That whilom ye had sent unto Surrye.
It am I, fader, that in the salte see
Was put allone and damnd for to dye.
Now, goode fader, mercy I yow crye!
Sende me namoore unto noon hevenesse,
But thonketh my lord heere or his kyndenesse."
(MLT, 1105 ff.)

Gower's Constance thanks God for her father's good health whereas Chaucer's daughter reawakens old sorrows by reminding the grieving father that it was he who sent her forth to such a horrible destiny. Constance, throughout her years of solitude and sorrow, must have thought often and bitterly of her miseries and of their origin. Thus her vindictive reaction, which may seem unbecoming and ungracious, is again quite human and natural. Fortunately these feelings seem to disappear in the joy and relief that accompany her father's recognition of her.

There are three other outstanding types of changes or additions in the Chaucerian version. These are discussed in detail by Edward Block but should be mentioned here because they elevate the literary quality of the Chaucerian version. The first of these is the use of the apostrophe, a rhetorical device in which the narrator

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37 Block, op. cit., pp. 572-616.
interrupts the narrative to inject his personal feelings. These usually take the form of pious moralizing or of vehement denunciation. Sometimes they help to prepare the reader for the next scene or for some particular action. This first quotation describes the narrator's outrage at the evilness of the "Sowdanesse":

O Sowdanesse, roote of iniquitee:
Virago, thou Semyrame the second:
O serpent under femynnyyte,
Lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde:
O feyned womman, al that may confound
Virtu and innocence, thurgh thy malice,
Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice!

O Sathan, envious syn thilke day
That thou were chaced from oure heritage,
Wel knowestow to wommen the olde way:
Thou madest Eva brynge us in servage;
Thou wolt fordoon this Cristen mariage
Thyn instrument so, weylawey the while!
Maketh tow of wommen, whan thou wolt begile.

(MLT, 358 ff.)

The second is a warning proverbial in its pessimistic tone:

O sodeyn wo, that evere are successor
To worldly blisse, spreyn with bitterness:
The ende of the joye of oure worldly labour:
Wo occupieth the fyn of oure gladnesse.
Herke this counsell for thy sikernesse:
Upon thy glade day have in thy mynde
The unwar wo or harm that cometh behynde.

(MLT, 421 ff.)

The third is an exhortation in which the narrator is determined to produce sympathy for the forlorn Heroine:

O queenes, lynvyng in prosperitee,
Duchesses, and ye laydes everichone,
Haveth som rowthe on hire adverstitee!
An Emperoures doghter stant alone;
She hath no wont to whom to make hir mone.
O blood roial, that stonest in this drede,
Per been thy freendes at thy grete nede!
(MLT, 652 ff.)

While these apostrophes are designed to give vent to the narrator's feelings, their primary purpose is to influence and direct the reactions of the members of his audience so that they will feel his indignation, his presentiment of evil, or his pity.

The second device used by Chaucer is that of the rhetorical question and answer, posed and answered by the narrator. As can be seen from the following illustration, this device is frequently used to dispel disbelief in the less probable aspects of the tale:

Yeres and dayes fleet this creature
Thurghout the See of Grece unto the Strayte
Of Marrok, as it was hire aventure.
On many a sory meel now may she bayte;
After hir deeth ful often may she wayte,
Er that the wilde wawes wol hire dryve
Unto the place ther she shal arryve.

Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn
Eek at the feste? who myghte her body save?
And I answere to that demande agayn,
Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave
Ther every wight save he, maister and knave,
Was with the leon frete er he asterte?
No wight but God, that he bar in his herte.

God liste to shewe his wonderful myracle
In hire, for we sholde seen his myghty werkis;
Crist, which that is to every harm triacle,
By certeine meenes afte, as knownen clerkis
Dooth thyng for certein ende that ful derk is
To mannnes wit, that for oure ignorance
No konne noght knowe his prudent purveiance.
Now sith she was nat at the feeste yslawe,
Who kept hir fro the drenchyng in the see?
Who kepte Jonas in the fisshes mawe
Til he was spouted up at Nynyvee?
Wel may men knowe it was no wight but he
That kepte peple Ebrayk from hir drenchynge,
With drye feel thurghout the see passyng.

Who oad the foure spirites of tempest
That power had t'anoyen lond and see,
Bothe north and wouth, and also west and est,
"Anoyeth neither see, ne land, ne tree?"
Soothly, the comandour of that was he
That fro the tempest ay this womman kepte
As wel whan she wook as whan she slepte.

Where myghte this womman mete and drynke have
Thre year and moore? how lasteth hire vitaille?
Who fedde the Egipcien Marie in the cave,
Or in desert? No wight but Crist, sanz faille.
Fyve thousand folk it was as greet mervaille
With loves fyve and fisshes two to feede.
God sent his fayson at hir grete neede.

(MLT, 463 ff.)

Both of these rhetorical devices are laden with
allusions to the Bible and to traditional Christian lore.
In the preceding illustrations alone there are references
to Eve and the serpent, Daniel and the lion, the Hebrews
crossing the Red Sea, Jonah and the whale, and the feeding
of the five thousand. No longer is the tale of Constance
merely moral or pious or generally religious; it is
specifically Christian. Also to be found in the tale are
various classical allusions. These, although secular, give
a learned tone that helps to reinforce the authenticity of
the tale. Block has described the effects of these rhetori-
cal devices and allusions as being similar to a tapestry.
He says that although it is contrived artistry and is
"somewhat formal and artificial," it is magnificent.38

Gower has, with his usual precision, fitted the tale of Constance into his grand outline as an example against the sin of detraction (saying and doing things with the intention of bringing harm to others). Genius introduces his "ensample" with the following advice, rather unexpected by all who know the story:

Bewar and lef thi wocke speche,
Wherof hath fallen ofte wreche
To many a man befor this time.
For who so wole his handes lime,
They moisten be the more uneclene;
For many a mote shal be sene,
That wolde noght cleve elles there;
And that schold every wys man fere:
For who so wol an other blame;
He secheth ofte his oghne schame,
Which elles myhte by riht stille.
For thi if that it be thi wille
To stonde upon amendement
I t enke telle for this sake,
Whereof thou miht ensample take.
(Book II, 571 ff.)

The conclusion reinforces his proposed moral:

And thus the wel menings of love
Was ate laste set above;
And so as thou hast herd tofore,
And false tunges weren lore,
Whiche upon love wolden lie.
Forthi touchende of this Envie
Which longeth unto baebitinge,
Be war thou make no lesinge
In hindringe of an other wiht:
(Book II, 1599 ff.)

While it is apparent to all that those who seek to harm

38 Block, Ibid., p. 586.
Constance are ultimately punished\(^{39}\) and that the emphasis on the ultimate triumph of love over all obstacles was probably intended as solace to the bleeding heart of the lover, the chief character of the *Confessio*, these reasons cannot disguise the weakness of such a frame or moral lesson when associated with the tale of Constance. The obvious point of God's final reward for faithfulness and fortitude is completely ignored.

Chaucer, on the other hand, had made the religious aspects so powerful that they have become the purpose and moral of the tale. To him the protection that God gives to those who believe unwaveringly in Him, to those whose faith is pure and unstrained, is the main theme of the tale. Both Gower and Chaucer retain remnants of the secular purpose, that of proving that true love, no matter how great its trials, will prevail at last.

There is probably no better way to become aware of Chaucer's superiority than to read the tale of Constance as it was written by Trivet or Gower. The achievement of Chaucer's version is summed up by Margaret Schlauch when she writes:

\(^{39}\)The Sultaness sees her people slaughtered by vengeful Romans, the accusing knight is struck by God in such a way that his eyes fall out, Donegild is burned alive by royal decree, and the would-be-seducer is drowned. These evil-doers, however, are the minor characters, and their destruction is never stressed.
It remained for Chaucer, however, to add the greatest quality of all; to infuse into the quaint, traditional plot the pathos of sentient and suffering human beings; to elevate what was dead and conventional into the realm of art.  

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CHAPTER IV

"FLORENT" OR "THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE"

The tale, as we know it, is actually a combination of two separate episodes, that of the quest and that of the loathly lady. In both versions a young knight, his life depending on his answer, is ordered to determine what all women most desire. He is given the life-saving answer (sovereignty after marriage) by a loathsome hag who demands marriage in return. Unable to avoid such a fate, the knight complies. Later, in the bed chamber, the unhappy youth is given a choice concerning the time or conditions necessary for the bride's transformation into a beauty. Unable to decide, the knight entrusts the decision to his bride. The hag, having gained sovereignty, becomes the embodiment of the knight's desires and hopes.

The origin of the loathly lady's transformation appears to have been an Irish tale in which the Sovereignty of Ireland, by using her fairy powers, transforms herself into a hag in order to test the worth of a chosen young man. The magic found in both Gower and Chaucer may derive indirectly from this source since it is found in no other analogue. Chaucer's Wife of Bath sets her tale in the days

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of King Arthur when there were fairies. The hag, herself, is first seen when a group of maidens dancing on the green disappear by magic. The implication is that both the maidens and the hag are fairy creatures. Later, at the time of the transformation, the hag apparently changes herself at her own will. There is no mention of an enchantment.

Gower's tale contains magical elements also. His loathly lady is waiting for the knight and not only knows his name but also the nature of his quest. An unexplained light fills the marriage chamber so Florent can neither feign sleep nor pretend his bride is less repulsive. The transformation here appears as an attempt to make Florent's choice even more difficult. In this instance, however, the girl is the victim of her stepmother's spell. The implication is that while the girl is human, the stepmother is an evil fairy or witch. Eisner finds that the presence of a wicked stepmother is common in the loathly lady stories, but that in type she is more Germanic than Irish. The source for the original loathly lady, however, does not in any way provide the source for the tale as told by Chaucer and Gower.

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42 Eisner, Ibid., p. 65.

43 It is quite possible that this source may have belonged to the Arthurian cycle. There are several facts which give support to this theory. First, both of the most closely related analogues, The Marriage of Sir Gawaine and
Eisner feels that a now lost common source was available to both Chaucer and Gower and that each remodeled the tale to suit his own needs. Using these two tales and the two analogues, *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine* and *The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, Eisner has constructed a hypothetical common source which would contain the following elements: Gawain as hero, the transformed hag with her concern about sovereignty over a husband, the enchanter (probably a stepmother), the rape scene, the quest concerning the nature of woman, the anger of the instigator of the quest when the answer is given, and the choice of fair by day and foul by night or vice versa. 44

Maynadier proposed a different source for the tale. He wrote, "Medieval story-tellers in general were

The *Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, definitely have the same characters and settings as the tales of the Arthurian cycle; second, Chaucer's tale is set in the court of King Arthur; and third, Gower's Florent is the nephew of the unnamed emperor, the same relationship which Gawain bears to Arthur.

44 Eisner, *op. cit.*, p. 71. To substantiate this hypothesis he proposes that an unknown pre-Chaucerian joined two tales of Gawain: *Gawain and the Lady of Lys*, which corresponds rather well to Chaucer's rape scene, and the Gawain version of the loathly lady tale, which is to be found among the analogues to the tales of Gower and Chaucer. *Ibid.*, p. 57. Eisner feels that neither Gower nor Chaucer was willing to sully the reputation of Gawain by associating him with rape so each changed the story accordingly. Gower removed the objectionable act and changed the setting and the knight's name. Chaucer reduced his knight in rank and gave him no name.
Not only was the invention of a plot in the Middle Ages most rare, but even if Chaucer, departing from the usual mediaeval custom had happened to invent a story, the "moral Gower," we feel sure must have drawn from some source. . . . Gower was lacking in originality. . . . We naturally ask, then, in regard to this tale of an obedient husband, . . . where the writer found it? Rather than allow any credit to Gower, he proposes a Latin book of exempla, which would be similar to the *Gesta Romanorum* but which is unknown in our times, as Gower's source. He feels that this would explain both the courtly setting and "the general tone of the story, with its none too pat moral." He makes no suggestion as to how the story found its way into such a book. There are those who insist upon sacrificing Gower in Chaucer's honor, and this seems a perfect example of such an action.

Within the tales by Gower and Chaucer there are

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46 Ibid., p. 6.

47 This idea is also repeated by Schofield. Schofield, *op. cit.*, p. 224.


49 In his introduction to the works of John Gower, Macaulay wrote: "Modern critics, instead of endeavoring to appreciate fairly such merits as he [Gower] has, have often felt called upon to offer him up as a sacrifice to the honour of Chaucer, who assuredly needs no such addition to his glory." Gower, *The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, p. x.
three areas of difference. The first introduces the knight and provides a reason for the subsequent quest. The second introduces the loathly lady and describes the exchange of a marriage vow for the solution to the quest question. The third covers the choice, the transformation, and the solution.

Gower introduces the reader to a young knight of chivalric perfection who is the emperor's nephew. In true knightly tradition he goes forth to seek adventures in order to build up his reputation. Before long he is ambushed and captured, a tactic designed to cast aspersions on the honor of the captors, not on that of Florent. The capture is part of a plot to revenge the death of Branchus, whom Florent has slain in combat. This does not detract from Florent, for such deeds are accepted conduct. Once Florent has been captured, a new problem arises. How can his captors destroy him without bringing vengeance upon themselves? Branchus' wise old grandmother proposes the solution. Florent is forced to sign an agreement whereby he will forfeit his life and will promise that there will be no retaliation if, after a given time, he cannot answer a question that the grandmother will give him. The question is the familiar one: what does woman most desire?

It is absolutely necessary that Florent remain
spotless. By creating a situation resulting from actions that are traditionally acceptable, Gower has both fulfilled this condition and supplied a credible reason for the quest.

Almost the antithesis of Florent, Chaucer's hero is a gay young blade, selfish and indolent. He leaves his castle not to protect the nation but to idle away his time in hawking. Down by the river he performs his mighty deed of the day. He does not do battle with a giant or a river serpent; instead, withstanding all her efforts, he has his way with a young maiden.

Rape is never deemed an admirable act, not even when the culprit is a knight. The young man is sentenced to die. Luck is with him, however. He is apparently a favorite, and, after much pleading by the queen and her ladies, he is turned over to the Court of Love. This court gives him the chance to live and to be pardoned provided he can, after a year and a day, answer the question put before him: what does a woman most desire?

Chaucer's young man is now in a predicament equivalent to that of Gower's Florent. Each one, his life in jeopardy is ready to set out on a quest. The atmosphere is entirely different though. The reader is sympathetic with Florent, but the possibility that Chaucer's knight may

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50 The enchanted princess must marry a perfect knight before the transforming spell can be broken.
avoid punishment seems a miscarriage of justice. No admirable or extenuating factor has been introduced in his favor.

During the time allowed, each knight consults with others, and each has a similar problem; both women and wise men can only agree to disagree. The knights, their hearts filled with sorrow, begin the journey to the courts of their trials on the last possible day, expecting death.

Florent is riding slowly, in a mood of melancholy meditation, when he sees the ugliest creature imaginable sitting under a tree. Like any average person, he wants to pass quickly, but she calls to him. It is not a general salutation; she uses his name. In such a situation a true gentleman can only return to see what she wants. To his amazement, she knows the nature of his quest and that he has no answer. She also says she can and will give him the needed response if he will promise to marry her. One can imagine the flurried lift to Florent's spirits when he discovers that here is a possible escape and the depression that must have seized him when he hears the conditions.

Using a realistic style, Gower describes Florent's dilemma. The reader sees Florent's feelings through his actions as he rides off and returns, as he vacillates between decisions,

\[\text{Gower's description of the lady (lines 1677 ff.), reminding one of the cataloging of features found in the descriptions of dragons and giants, left nothing to the imagination of his audience.}\]
even as he attempts to bribe her to make a lesser demand. Man's most basic instinct is to survive, and this determines Florent's choice; to live, even though his best years would be wasted with her, would be better than to die. For her information he gives his pledge. A sympathetic touch is given the old crone when she tells Florent that she will release him if any other answer will satisfy his examiner. With this one ray of hope Florent returns to court and exhausts the grandmother, his questioner, with a steady stream of unacceptable answers.

Finally he is forced to give a final answer; he unwillingly gives that of the hag. That this was the answer is immediately apparent from the spontaneous outburst from an enraged grandmother. She furiously curses the one who has betrayed woman's secret. It should be obvious to all, however, that she cares not about the secret but about her carefully laid plot which has gone awry; her desires have been thwarted. Florent is free and there can never be any revenge for the killing of Branchus. Probably unable to describe his own emotions, Florent returns to the waiting hag, raises her to his horse, and takes her to his home. Regardless of his debt to her, this was not a proud moment. The marriage vows were exchanged that night.

Chaucer simplified his tale considerably. As his knight is returning from an equally fruitless quest, he sees four and twenty maidens dancing. In familiar fairy fashion
they disappear as he approaches, and in their place sits a foul old wife. She asks the knight to state his problem. Hearing it, she says that if he will promise to grant her first request she will give him the answer. Without a moment of hesitation or a single thought to the future he agrees, and she whispers the answer in his ear. This young man has learned nothing from his past mistakes; once again he has committed a hasty and unpremeditated action designed to satisfy his needs of the moment. Chaucer surpasses Gower when he plays on his audience's curiosity by withholding the hag's answer until the knight gives it in court.

When Chaucer's knight delivers his answer, he does so with confidence and a sense of self-satisfaction. All women, old and young, agree with him, and all rule that he is to live. The thoughtless "bachelor" seems overly lucky until the hag comes forward. Whether it is from eagerness to make her request or because she knows the lack of honor in the man and wants both authority and witnesses on her side, the old woman has also appeared in court that day; she chooses this, his moment of exultation and triumph, to make her demand. Her first request is that he marry her and love her. Since no amount of wheedling will change her request, he marries her quietly\(^5\) the following morning and then goes

\(^5\) Chaucer says that some would criticize him for not describing the wedding and the feast, but he excuses himself
into seclusion for the remainder of the day.

The young men in both stories find themselves in similar circumstances, but although their destinations are the same, they have traveled separate paths. Innocent Florent, concluding that no acceptable compromise can be effected, acts as judge and condemns himself to a life marred by union with the loathly lady. Chaucer's unnamed knight feels lucky and probably superior to law and order. More than anything else it is a blow to his pride when he is forced to marry a woman who is poor, old, and very ugly.

As wedding day becomes wedding night, the hag in each tale becomes playful and demands her right as a bride, the right to sleep with her husband. Both grooms are understandably reluctant, and once in the marriage bed both turn their sleepless eyes away from their lawful wives. Both are utterly miserable.

Florent has other miseries. Not only is his misshapen wife completely naked but the chamber is filled with an unexplained light, and Coise, with no encouragement on Florent's part, puts her arms around him and begs him to turn over. She reminds him that now they "ben bothe on," and she asks him to honor his marriage vows. Realizing that

by saying that (as in Gower's tale) there was neither gaiety nor feasting. In The Weddynge of Sir Gawaine and Dame Ragnell, however, there is a long description of the feast with an emphasis on the bride's appetite.
he should not break a vow, he concedes and accepts his penance. He turns toward his lady, the fairest that he has ever seen!

The mood of exuberance followed by depression recurs as Florent believes himself saved only to be faced by another dilemma when the girl says:

He mot on of two thinges chese,  
Wher he wol have hire such on nyht,  
Or elles upon daies lyht,  
For he schal noght have bothe tuo.  
(Book I, 1810 ff.)

Florent is again in conflict with himself. He ponders the possible answers. This time, since neither choice is as powerful as life, the force which guided his decision to marry her, he cannot bring himself to reach a conclusion. Finally he says:

... "o ye, my lyves hele,  
Sey what you list in my querele,  
I not what answere I schal yive;  
Bot evere whil that I may live  
I wol that ye by my maistresse,  
For I can noght miselve geese  
Whichis the beste unto my chois.  
Thus grate I you myn hole vois,  
Ches for ous bothen, I you praiye;  
And what as evere that ye seie,  
Riht as ye wole so wol I."  
(Book I, 1821 ff.)

By unconsciously repeating the answer to the quest question, he breaks the magic spell cast upon her by the proverbially wicked stepmother. Coise will now be beautiful both night and day for the rest of her life. The antidote to the spell was the gaining of the love and sovereignty of the knight
whose good name and good deeds surpassed all others. It was for this reason that no hint of selfishness, cruelty, or ignobility could be allowed to blight Florent's good name. In such an instance it would have been necessary for the lady to choose another knight. The final event (before the happy-ever-after ending which is associated with fairy tales) is the disclosure that Coise is really a Sicilian princess and is, therefore, a very acceptable mate for noble Florent.

Chaucer's knight is tossing to and fro in bed. His smiling wife, at least for the moment, apparently enjoys his consternation and self-pity; she teases him by asking if it is the law for Arthur's knights to be so modest with their wives or if she is guilty of some fault. She adds, "For Goddes love, tell me it, And it shall be amended, if I may." The knight, discourteous in his curtness, cries that nothing can help because she is ugly, old, and of low degree. The old woman replies, "I koude amende al this, If that me liste," and then delivers what has been called the "curtain speech." Some critics feel this speech is a long digression, others that it is merely a way of more closely uniting the story with its supposed narrator, the Wife of

Snell, op. cit., p. 209.
Bath, and still others that it is the actual turning
point of the story. The woman scolds her groom for con-
fusing nobleness of character with the richness of one's
ancestors and cites Dante when asserting that *gentilesses*
comes from God and that He does not distinguish between the
rich and the poor. She reminds him that even Jesus was poor
and of low degree.

Having disposed of one of his complaints, she con-
tinues by attacking his repulsion from her age and ugliness.
She says that everyone knows old people should be respected
for their wisdom and that old, ugly wives are always faith-
ful. Yet she says that she understands how he feels and
that she will take care of his "worldly appetite":

"Chese now," quod she, "oon of thise thynges tweye:
To han me foul and old til that I deye,
And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
And nevere yow displesen in al my lyf;
Or elles ye wol hav me yong and fair,
And take youre aventure of the repair
That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
Or in som othre place, may wel be.
Now chese yourselven, whethere that yow liketh."
(WBT, 1219 ff.)

Unlike Florent, this knight must choose between morality

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54 George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of
This same opinion is held by Gordon Hall Gerould,
Chaucerian Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1952), p. 73.

55 J. P. Roppolo, "The Converted Knight," College
English, XII (1951) pp. 266-67.
and immorality, between *gentilesse* and the courtly freedoms that he himself had enjoyed. Quite obviously he does not want his wife to be faithless. Neither does he wish to be forever shackled to one who is old and ugly. He is still too proud for that.

In his inability to decide he, like Florent, allows his bride to choose which would be the more pleasant and honorable. It is almost comic that she makes him wait for her decision which she checks to be sure that this acceptance of her wisdom is to be a permanent arrangement and that the endearments, "my lady and my love, and wyf so deere," are not said with a sneer or a touch of sarcasm. Once she is satisfied that all is well, her first words are a taunting "kys me." Then and only then does she reveal her decision, which seems her choice rather than the result of witch's work. Since she is to have sovereignty, she will be fair and faithful; to encourage her husband, she tells him to open the curtain in order to see how she has changed. The knight's heart is "bathed in a bath of blisse" and in story-book fashion they, too, lives happily ever after.

For the third time the knights have reached a similar objective. Each is happily married to a most beautiful young woman.

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56 The reader must remember that he met the old woman as a part of his punishment for indulging his sexual appetite.
Gower's Florent does not seem to modern readers an individual and, indeed, he is not. He is a type made familiar by the knights of perfection found in Arthurian romance. Above all a knight must honor his vows, and it is in this way that Florent achieves happiness. By accepting his responsibility to love his wife, he encourages her to offer him the choice. Then by giving his wife the respect he would have given his mistress, by making her sovereign, he has proved himself a true knight and has received his reward.

Not a type, Chaucer's young man is an individual, a sinner whose penance is mental anguish. For the first time in his life he is forced into a position where he must give and not take; he has nowhere to go and no one to turn to; he must face and accept the consequences of his actions. He is rewarded when he conquers his pride and selfishness and submits to the authority of another. It could be said that he is rewarded for taking his first step in becoming not only a good husband but also a better person.

Only one problem remains. Why were these stories written, and in what manner do they fit into the books as a whole? Gower's tale is found in Book I and was written to show than man should conquer his pride and be obedient, particularly in love. Some feel that Gower's choice of the

57Gawain is the best known example of the perfect type.
word obedience is too weak to support a tale on sovereignty, but that is just what he meant: a man should be obedient to his sovereign, who, in love, is his wife. This tale also shows Gower's attitude toward one aspect of marriage. While knighthood, chivalry, and courtly love were fading flowers by the time the Confessio Amantis was written, Gower saw that the very foundation of the family situation was based on a fallacy established by these institutions. It is not at all logical that a woman who has seen her lover as a servant could, just because a wedding has occurred, suddenly accept the same man as her lord and master. Gower suggests that if a man as lover could serve his mistress, could humble himself before her, then as a husband he should do no less.

Chaucer's tale has two obvious purposes. In the first place it appears to have the traditional moral that a man should accept his wife's sovereignty. It is this moral and the subsequent notice that now the young wife "obeyed hym [her husband] in everythyng/That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" that make the tale both an exemplum and a tool in the hands of its narrator.

The prologue and tale of the Wife of Bath form one of the most skillfully correlated units in all of the Canterbury Tales. The spirit of the garrulous wife, so vividly portrayed in the General Prologue, permeates almost every
line she utters. Her prologue is a public confession of her marital relations with her five husbands. She advocates both a lusty sexual relationship and feminine sovereignty. Whether she wishes to tone down the militancy of her words or whether she is truly satisfied with nominal sovereignty is uncertain. Nevertheless, she stresses that once Jankyn, husband number five, had given her sovereignty:

After that day we hadden never debaat.
God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
And also trewe, . . .
(WBP, 822 ff.)

This idea is repeated in the tale which she is telling to prove that to be happy in marriage, a man must give up his sovereignty; only then is a woman willing to be true and gentle.

Gower's Confessor, Genius, narrates the tale of Florent. The reader knows this, but nowhere is a personal characteristic revealed; nowhere does Genius intrude a personal comment into the narrative; nowhere is there an interruption. This cannot be said of Chaucer's Wife, who is ever present. First, she introduces her tale with an unsubtle jab at friars—in retaliation for the friar's rude interruption during her prologue. Then she is reminded of the legend of Midas' ears when she mentions women's inability to keep secrets and cannot resist the temptation to digress. Next, the good wife becomes quite earnest during the curtain speech, perhaps because she was defending her own main
defects and she wants everyone to know that age, poverty, and homeliness should not be counted against her by a possible sixth husband. Last Dame Alisoun concludes her entire harangue with a small petition that sums up her personal philosophy:

... Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye jhesu shorte her lyves
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sense hem soone verry pestilence!
(WBT, 1258 ff.)

There is no reason to suppose that Chaucer intended his audience to accept this judgment as his own; it is part of the characterization of the Wife of Bath, as is the entire proposition of feminine sovereignty. There is, however, a dictum within the tale which Chaucer presents repeatedly in his work and which may be taken as the grain of truth he hoped his audience would sift from the chaff of the Wife's tale. The idea that gentilesse is God-given to those who are humble and who seek to live in a right manner is found not only in the hag's curtain speech but in the patient and forgiving heart of poor Griselda and in the theme of the Franklin's tale. That gentilesse does not always appear in the noble and rich is seen in the Wife's young knight and is shown even more specifically in
the character of Appius in the Physician's tale. The source
of and the need for gentilesse was of constant concern to
Chaucer.
CHAPTER V

"VIRGINIA" OR "THE PHYSICIAN'S TALE"

The story of Virginia is both simple and short. As told by Chaucer and Gower it is concerned with a lecherous man of power who desires the pure and beautiful daughter of a noble knight. Realizing that she is unattainable, he schemes in order to have her. Acting as a judge, he makes a mockery of the law and of justice by awarding Virginia to a third person who claims she is really his servant. Seeing through the ruse, the father slays his daughter rather than have her dishonored. Shocked by the entire incident, the public reacts by deposing the man of power and by punishing severely all those who had been involved in his schemes.

In the Confessio Amantis this tale fits neatly into its small niche within the grand framework. In the long digression (book seven) on the education of Alexander, the subject of Philosophy is divided, and its third part is termed Practic. The third division of Practic is Politics (policy), in which chastity in rulers is a fifth point. The story of Virginia is one of a series of stories told as
examples of the misfortunes which overtake unchaste rulers. 58

The confessor introduces his tale by saying:

Bot yet an other remembrance
That rihtwisnesse and lecherie
Acorden noght in compaignie
With him that hath the lawe on honde,
That mai a man wel understonde,
As be a tale thou shalt wite,
Of olde ensample as it is write.

(Book VII, 5124 ff.)

and the confessor concludes his tale by re-emphasizing the point he was making:

And thus thunchaste was chastised,
Wherof thei myhte ben avised
That scholden afterward governe,
And be this evidence lerne,
Hou it is good a king eschuie
The lust of vice and vertu suie.

(Book VII, 5301 ff.)

Gower chose to follow Livy's History for the main sequence of incidents, and there seems to be no evidence that he was influenced by, or was even aware of, the versions given by Jean de Meun and Chaucer. The majority of Gower's changes fall into three categories: he brings the story within the interest circle of his audience, he increases the speed of the dramatic action, and he modernizes the subplot.

Familiar with his audience, Gower realized that

58 To Gower, being chaste meant confining oneself to one's legal spouse. This, he felt, was especially important in the case of rulers, who should be examples of perfection for those who look to them for guidance. Book VII, lines 4215 ff.
people who accepted such practices, even in theory, as le droit du seigneur would have little or no sympathy for Virginia and her father and would see little reason for Appius' contrived means of obtaining the girl if these characters remained among the lower classes of society (Livy made them plebians); therefore, Gower made Virginius a knight and raised Ilicius, the betrothed of Virginia, from a leader of the people to a worthy knight of great lineage. This gives the characters membership in the social circle of the audience, and the tendency for the audience to associate themselves with the characters becomes not only possible but natural. Since low and despicable action would be accepted as natural on the part of a common servant, Claudius is raised from his position as a retainer to that of brother to the governor. The result is that the governor's sin of lechery becomes even more obvious and ugly. While Gower was making these changes, he also removed from the judgment scene all evidence of an unfamiliar Roman spectacle and transformed it into a familiar English scene where injured parties take their complaints to the lords for just decisions.

The second group of changes is concerned with speeding up the action and increasing the dramatic force. Gower follows Livy closely through the original summoning of Virginia to appear in court and the demand by her friends
that a postponement be made until her father can be summoned from the battlefield. He omits as extraneous, however, the first judgment that Virginia must go with Claudius during this period of waiting, the intercession in her behalf by an uncle, the appearance and threats of Ilicius, and the attempt to postpone the arrival of her father. Gower again follows Livy with regard to the actions of Appius at the hearing, but it is an expected shock when Virginius, immediately upon hearing the decision, draws his sword and forces it through his daughter's side in the presence of all and publicly explains:

"Lo, take hire ther, thou wrongfull king,
For me is levere upon this thing
To be the fader of a Maide,
Thogh sche be ded, than if men saide
That in her lif sche were schamed.
And I therof were evele named."

(Book VII, 5247 ff.)

This action is unique in Gower's version of the tale, and the suddenness of the action brings home to everyone the significance of the entire situation. For those who find Virginius' action unbelievable, it must be noted that it probably was not as spontaneous as it seemed. He has had the two days of the return journey to ponder the situation and determine his actions. 60

59In Livy's version, the father leads the girl to a quiet shrine where he stabs her in the heart with his knife.

60Chaucer also gave Virginius time to ponder since he had to go to his home to tell his daughter the court's decision.
Thirdly, Gower changed the emphasis of the subplot. To Livy, the horror of Appius' decision was that Virginia would be reduced from the level of a freeman to that of a slave. Livy's Virginius slays his daughter in order to assert her freedom. In medieval England the evils of slavery were not a problem, and such a situation would have held little meaning. To people who were religious, almost to the point of forming a cult of the Virgin, the loss of Virginia's virginity would have been a much more real problem. Both Jean de Meun and John Gower made this change in emphasis.

Gower preferred to tell his stories in a clear and orderly manner which permitted no digressions. The point of his story concerned the fall of a king because he yielded to sin. Therefore the description of Virginia herself is reduced to one very romantic touch when Appius hears of a "gentil Maide" about whom "men seiden that so fair a lif as sche was noght in al the toun"; his reason is immediately overpowered by an uncontrolled passion. The narrative then follows Appius: he learns his desire is to be frustrated because of her engagement; he plots to attain her anyway; he foolishly allows justice to miscarry in his refusal to be thwarted; and he shouts for Virginius' arrest when he sees failure even in his moment of apparent triumph. Appius remains the central subject even when unrest, displeasure, and fear arouse the people to depose.
the king. This leads logically to the previously stated moral ending.

In the Canterbury Tales, it is the physician who tells the tale of Virginia. Most critics agree that this choice was not particularly appropriate to the teller, although one writer suggested that since the subject is virginity, which is a physical quality, it might thus appeal to the physician. Neither the plot nor the moral of this tale has a direct connection with preceding or subsequent tales, and the only plausible explanation for introducing such a bloodcurdling story is that of contrast. While there is no linking material to indicate where fragment VI (of which the Physician's is the initial tale) was to appear in the Canterbury Tales, it is usually printed after the Franklin's tale of gentilesse and pure love, which ends happily. The audience reaction to the physician's tale is also a distinct contrast to that following the previously told tales. In this instance, Harry Baily rants and raves about the false justice for some thirty lines and finally declares that only a glass of ale and a merry tale can renew his gay spirit.

The moral of the tale is emphasized in the conclusion:

Heere may men seen how synne hath his merite.  
Beth war, for no man woot whom God wol smyte  
In no degree, ne in which manere wyse  
The worm of conscience may agryse
O wikked lyf, thought it so privee be
That no man woot therof but God and he.
For be he lewed man, or ellis lered,
He noot how soone that he shal been afered.
Therfore I rede how this conseil take:
Forsaketh synne, or synne yow forsake.

(PhT, 277 ff.)

The stated purpose, then, is that of an exemplum concerned with the punishment of sin. Chaucer, however, has interpolated such a quantity of matter dealing with the merits and decisions of Virginia that the additions have resulted in a shift of emphasis from the destruction of Evil to the indestructibility of Good.

Scholars agree that the Physician's tale was written before 1390, indirectly implying that it precedes the version in the Confessio Amantis. Chaucer's chief source was Jean de Meun's Roman de la Rose. The following incidents are found in both versions. Appius conspires with Claudius, a churl, to obtain Virginia, whom he covets. Claudius then declares that she was born his servant but was stolen and raised as Virginius' daughter. He sues for her return. Virginius alone is called into court but is not allowed to present his case before the judge's decision.  

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61 More specifically, the date of composition is believed to be between 1386-1388. See the Explanatory Notes in Chaucer, op. cit., p. 727.

62 Jean de Meun cites Livy as his source; the barbaric details seem to be de Meun's own additions. Both of these tales are reprinted by Edgar F. Shannon in the Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales. Bryan and Dempster, op. cit., p. 398.
in Claudius' favor is made. Virginius, understanding the true meaning of this action, beheads his daughter and presents only the bloody head. The people, outraged at the injustice, defend Virginius. Appius is cast into prison, where he commits suicide; Claudius is condemned to die, but through Virginius' intercession his sentence is reduced to exile. The moral of the tale, as stated at its conclusion, is in perfect accord with the tale thus far.

Jean de Meun cited Livy as his source. While this perhaps accounts for Chaucer's similar citation, some feel that internal evidence indicates Chaucer's first-hand familiarity with Livy.

To this basic material, Chaucer made his own additions—those which changed the entire tone of the story. Although Chaucer's tale first introduces Virginius, a noble knight, the subject is immediately shifted to his only child, a daughter. At first the fact that Virginia is an only child implies only that she is probably much loved; later it deepens the tragedy of the dilemma in which Virginius finds himself and the sympathy one feels for him as he carries out his decision. Virginia's beauty and goodness are traditionally praised: Chaucer, however, has devoted

63Like Livy, Chaucer mentions Virginia's mother, and Chaucer has Appius see Virginia as she is entering a temple. It is to be presumed that Virginia and her nurse were going to a temple when, in Livy, they entered the forum.
about eighty-five lines to the subject. Here he describes her as the perfect young lady—modest, temperate, discreet in words and actions, patient, humble, prudent, and wary of idleness. This long cataloguing of Virginia's qualities draws attention to the girl herself. She is the flower of medieval perfection, and the reader's interest becomes centered in the maintenance of, or a possible fall from, her perfection.

Chaucer's next major addition involves the aftermath of the trial, at which Virginia is not present. The stunned father must tell his daughter what has happened. Here Chaucer succeeds in raising the tone to one of true despair rather than weeping melodrama as the father makes his tender declaration of love for his daughter and explains that the decision must be between life filled with shame or virgin

64 He also added the physician's advice to parents and governesses, some of which is proverbial* and some of which may be an allusion to John of Gaunt's family.** These comments are directed to no particular pilgrim, and indeed there is not one to whom they would be applicable. This is a typical example of Chaucer's rambling digressions, which, humorous or instructive as they may be, neither add to the dignity of the tale nor promote the action.

*For a discussion of these proverbs see Bartlett Jere Whiting, Chaucer's Use of Proverbs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 110.

**For a more complete explanation see the Explanatory Notes for the Physician's Tale. Chaucer, _op. cit_. , p. 727.

death and that he has chosen the latter. As would be expected of a young girl on the threshold of maturity, she begs for time to think; she faints, she cries, she pleads for a third choice. Then she becomes calm, accepts the decision, and thanks God that she may die a maiden. This speech seems to be modeled on the examples of self-sacrifice of the virgin martyrs described by St. Jerome and St. Ambrose. It is this final calm acceptance with a touch of satisfaction (almost pleasure) on the part of Virginia that changes the overall tone of the tale from one of public vengeance against evil rulers to a pseudo-hagiographical depiction of Virginia's death. The remainder of the tale, which parallels Jean de Meun's, is anti-climactical and seems only a means of tying up loose ends. The concluding statement, previously quoted, is applicable to the original tale but seems tacked on after the Chaucerian changes.

The major difference in the two versions is that Gower tells his simple and direct tale for an expressed and maintained purpose. Because the situation is so deftly sketched, the reader becomes emotionally involved. The reader imagines himself present at the trial, sees the sacrifice of Virginia, and later finds himself a member of the mob which deposes the king. For this reason there is need

66 For a more complete discussion see Young, op. cit., p. 344.
neither for descriptions of the character nor appearance of the individuals involved nor for pointed descriptions of shock, pity, horror, fear, or anger.

Chaucer's tale is told in his familiar style, casual and colloquial. The unskilled narrator digresses to insert his personal advice and elaborates at length on what appears to him to be a true tragedy—the sudden destruction of the perfect young lady. He is in fact so moved that he becomes rattled and allows his undue emphasis on the tragic incident to overshadow the actual point he is making.

In spite of this, and in spite of the disagreeableness of the vivid picture we are given of the blood dripping from the severed head of innocent Virginia, most modern readers will prefer Chaucer's version. Not only does Chaucer's longer line give him greater scope and variety, but the average person prefers to have a story told in a personal manner (even by a bossy, loquacious old man) than to be preached to and warned by a priest. Gower's tale has not only the perfection but also the cold impersonality of a delicate illustration in a monk's manuscript.
CHAPTER VI

"PHEBUS AND CORNIDE" OR "THE MANCIPLE'S TALE"

This tale is a medieval "why" story with a moral, and it tells of the tattle-tale crow. Phebus loves Cornide above all else, but she gives herself to another. Knowing this, the crow, who hopes to please and to be rewarded, tells all to Phebus, who kills Cornide in a moment of rage. Later he regrets his haste, and in order to rationalize his guilt, he blames the crow. As punishment, and as a reminder to all men to beware of tale-tellers, he changes the crow's color from white to black and deprives him of his ability to speak and sing. The moral is two-fold. Do not tell all you know, and do not listen to all you are told, for no one profits by such knowledge.

Gower inserts this tale as a brief anecdote of thirty-four lines in the third book of his Confessio. The third of the seven deadly sins is Wrath or Anger, of which Cheste is the second division. The tale is told primarily as an example of the evils that will eventually befall one who continually speaks ill of others.

67Cheste is the inability to keep a secret, particularly if it is unfavorable to another or will bring about discord. It is similar to the modern word gossip.
The Confessor introduces his "ensample" with these words:

Mi Sone, be thou war ther by,
And hold thi tunge stille clos;
For who that hath his word desclos
Er that he wite what he mene,
He is fulofte nyh his tene
And lest ful many time grace,
Wher that he wolde his thonk pourchace.

And over this, my Sone diere,
Of othre men, if thou miht hiere
In private what thei have wroght,
Hold conseil and descoevere it noght,
For Cheste can no conseil hele,
Or be it wo or be it wele; . . .
(Book III, 768 ff.)

and makes a similar conclusion in order to stress the moral:

Be war therfore and sei the beste,
If thow wolt be thiself in reste,
(Book III, 815 ff.)

As the Confessor says, this tale is very old. Gower probably used the version in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as his guide, but he has made numerous changes. Since his tale is to be short and straight to the point, he has deleted all mention of the second bird and of the personal affairs of Phebus and Cornide since the presence of these details would add nothing to the tale and would appear as unnecessary

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68 In the classical version, the crow warns the raven against tale telling and tells her own experience as an example. The raven ignores her advice.

69 The classical Coronis laments that her child, by her lover, will not be born; Phebus repents of his actions and tries to save her. Realizing it is too late, he takes the child by caesarian section and then cremates Coronis.
digressions. Having cut the tale down to a manageable size, Gower makes a number of changes. He is one of a very few authors who do not imply the marriage of Phebus and Cornide; in this way he eliminates the sin of adultery. He is unique in making Cornide the owner of the talking bird. This makes the bird's actions more distasteful. In this situation he is not trying to inform his master; instead, the bird is betraying his long-time mistress for the sheer pleasure of telling all he knows. Cornide's affair is much reduced:

So it befell upon a chauncce,
A yong kniht tok hire aqueintance
    And hadde of hire al that he wolde:
(Book III, 788 ff.)

This seems to be an attempt by Gower to reduce the evidence damaging Cornide's character and to minimize the possibility that his audience would feel that in the light of her capricious infidelity she got what she deserved. Under no circumstances must murder seem a justifiable act.

Descriptive passages are negligible. Since the audience was probably already familiar with the tale, it was necessary to include only such details as would recall the story and those which stress the changes Gower felt were necessary. For example the qualities of the "fals bridd" are not elaborated upon beyond three lines:

This briddes name was as tho
Corvus, the which was thenne also
Welmore whyt than eny Swan,
(Book III, 795 ff.)
and Phebus' sorrow is stated simply in two lines:

    Bot after him was wo ynowh,
    And tok a full gret repentance. . . .
    (Book III, 802 ff.)

Gower's point of view was completely medieval. Touches of this are seen not only in the designation of the lover as a knight but also in Phebus' use of a sword, a suitable weapon for a medieval knight, when he killed Cornide. Phebus does, however, retain some of his classical godly powers. He is able to effect an instantaneous transformation of the bird from white to black, a characteristic coloring to be retained by its progeny, and the reduction of its vocal ability to the production of harsh cries, eternally signifying mishap.

In this brief story there is but one digression. It ties the tale to the book as a whole since it is an observation on the uncertainties of love:

    . . . bot what schal befalle
    Of love ther is noman knoweth. . . .
    (Book III, 786 ff.)

The results of Gower's changes are that the story makes a more direct appeal to his audience and that it is poignant enough to remember while short enough to repeat. The length also provides contrast within the Confessio: it is much shorter than the average tale.

A similar story is told in the Canterbury Tales by the Manciple, a wily fellow capable of tricking his learned
masters. The manciple's tale has traditionally been classed as one of the earlier of the Canterbury Tales on the basis of its metrics and prosody,70 and humor of Chaucer's best work. This was the attitude, for example, of Mrs. Dempster, who states that "dramatic irony" in the tale "was not avoided; it was simply neglected," as it was in the tales included in The Legend of Good Women, which were written before Chaucer's "appreciation for dramatic irony was fully developed."71 She adds that this lack of irony is evidence of Chaucer's lack of interest in the tale.72

Richard Hazelton has completely reversed this opinion.73 He feels that the tale was not only a later production but is also one of the best examples of Chaucer's sophisticated satire. He finds the tale has been reduced to a medieval comedy and used as a parody of the "pretentious literary genre" that is "fundamentally immoral."74 Historically this tale has condoned the adulteress and the murderer in order to punish the gossip. He further describes

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72 Ibid., p. 83.
74 Ibid., p. 20.
the tale as a direct parody of Gower, as will be seen later.

While there are many analogues to Chaucer's tale, it has been presumed that his main source was Ovid's Metamorphoses, and that much of the non-narrative material, including the caged bird and the cat anecdotes, was found in Jean de Meun's portion of the Roman de la Rose. Hazelton questions the idea that Chaucer and Gower accidentally made the same deletions from the original, and he suggests that Chaucer used Gower's brief version as his guide. Further evidence for this is seen in the verbal similarities between the tales. Both compare the bird's whiteness to that of a swan, and Gower says the bird is made black in "tokne" of wicked speech while Chaucer says the change was in "tokenynge" that he caused the death of Cornide by his gossiping.

Assuming that this theory is correct, Chaucer then made some drastic changes, which Hazelton attributes to a well-made plan. To begin with, he reduced the noble god, Phebus, to a comic caricature much as he did Sir Thopas. His intentions are apparent in the first lines. First the descriptive phrase "the mooste lusty bachiller" has an ambiguous meaning for all who remember the Wife of Bath's tale. Second, would any medieval knight carry a bow, and would he find glory in being "the beste archer"? And third,

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can anyone imagine a romantic dragon-slayer, even one who kills his serpents as they sleep in the sun, who has "a wyf"? Phebus is further reduced in his domestic affairs to the position of the jealous husband who is being cuckolded by the commonest man in town.

Similar changes take place in the other characters. What remains is a "fabliaux situation, involving a husband who is a 'jaloux,' an adulterous wife, a paramour, and a 'lozengier' or jangler--the stock types of medieval comedy." A similar lack of nobility is seen in Phebus, who, after he has proved himself a doer of "noble worthy dedes," uses his bow and an arrow to murder his wife. In his sorrow, he does not tear his hair or claw his eyes; he breaks his musical instruments, which are of a type used by a tavern minstrel, and then his bow. Finding no relief he then turns on the unsuspecting bird much as an angry child smashes his toys and then blames a younger brother for his troubles.

Phebus does not transform the crow as a sign to help others, but in a moment of rage, similar to the moment in which he unthinkingly killed his wife, he grabs the bird, pulls out all of his feathers, and throws him out the door. This is hardly a god-like action or even the deed of a

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76 Hazelton, op. cit., pp. 7-9.
77 Ibid., p. 5.
respectable knight.

Unlike Gower, Chaucer does not condemn the crow, which is seen trying to warn his master of possible damage to his reputation and is thus unjustly punished for doing as he thought best. Chaucer does stress the immorality and lewdness of the entire situation but does not make a moral point of it. He seems to want his audience to be disgusted by the baseness which would be ignored in the traditional application of the tale. He continues in his mock-serious manner by drawing the usual conclusion that being a tattle-tale will get you nothing but trouble. He uses fifty-three lines to overstress the fact that this is the only point to such a tale.

Hazelton believes, since Gower was the most eminent of those who told tales mainly as moral illustrations, that Chaucer's version served not only as a critical parody of a literary type but also as a specific parody of Gower's literary style. It has already been pointed out that the events in his version follow those in Gower's. It should be further noted that "mi Sone" and "ensample" are almost formulae in Gower's work; both are used in this tale and in such a way that the proper, conscientious Confessor is turned into a nagging, advice-giving old "dame."

Hazelton's new interpretation may never be accepted, but it does provide an interesting basis for comparison with Gower.
Gower. It also goes a long way toward emphasizing the truth in Speirs' statement that Chaucer often "has the faculty of seeming more simple than he is." 78

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In a chapter concerned with general conclusions which may be drawn from the preceding chapters, there are several points which should be mentioned: form, presentation, tone or mood, and variety in the use of the social structure. The audience for which Gower and Chaucer wrote influenced the nature of their works also.

The language and verse forms used by the two writers are similar in many ways, but it must be admitted that Chaucer is superior. From the point of view of the lay reader, Chaucer is easier to read. While each used Middle English, it will be painfully apparent to the reader that Gower, who wrote proficiently in French, has used a larger percentage of words of French origin which "never arrived" so far as modern English is concerned. Chaucer's longer lines will also be preferred. The longer line allows more room for information, generally descriptive, which to some degree accounts for the richer quality of Chaucer's poetry. A third way in which Chaucer's form is superior to Gower's is the variety of his verse forms. Writing a work as long as the Confessio in such precise octosyllabic couplets is quite a feat, but it does tend toward monotony. Chaucer has forestalled this criticism by departing from his
familiar decasyllabic couplet. The Constance tale, for example, is in rime royal.\textsuperscript{79} For these reasons it will be seen that the lay reader will prefer the form used by Chaucer to that used by Gower.\textsuperscript{80}

The style or manner of presentation used by the two authors is similar, as previously pointed out, in that both set their stories within a framework which is of importance to the author and to the reader. There, however, the similarity appears to end. Chaucer's general prologue is frequently described as unequalled in originality and human interest. Most readers are fascinated by the diverse characters and the human foibles Chaucer's personages epitomize--fascinated to the extent that a longer description of their activities would be welcomed.

While the lovelorn have long been the subjects of tales, the character of Gower's old man pining (almost at the brink of death) for the love of a young maiden does not produce a sympathetic reaction in the reader; in fact he may find the situation somewhat ludicrous. Too many will see such an affair as a possible forerunner for a disaster such as the one described in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale." Even Gower

\textsuperscript{79}Besides the poems written rime royal, he included the doggerel "Sir Thopas" and two prose tales.

\textsuperscript{80}Many modern readers are using edited, modernized, and even prose versions of Chaucer's works, which have lost much of their artistic value. There is no modern translation of Gower's work for readers unable to cope with Middle English.
understood the situation was unworkable and ended the frame realistically by denying the old man his love. The wound made by Cupid's arrow was healed magically, and the old man learned that he could live without his dream. One more item which perhaps disturbs the reader is the final revelation of the lover as Gower himself. While it is a relief to find that this precise, moralistic poet does have normal human weaknesses, it is a little disappointing to learn that he is one with which few can be sympathetic.

The manner of presenting the moral teachings constitutes a second major difference. There is nothing subtle about Gower's Confessor. He chooses a topic, discusses it rather dispassionately but emphatically, and selects one or more stories to illustrate the point. No one could possibly read the Confessio Amantis and fail to get the message. Chaucer is less dogmatic. While almost all of his tales illustrate a moral purpose which is pointed out by the supposed narrators, nowhere does the reader feel he is being pressured to organize his life in a given pattern. Chaucer, however, goes beyond the teaching of moral precepts by helping his audience establish a set of values. In numerous instances he skillfully uses satire, contrast, and dialogue to expose sham, hypocrisy, and pettiness. Although Chaucer's

81 In spite of the pleadings of the famous older couples at her Court, Venus felt such a match was wrong and forbade it.
teachings are entertaining in form, they are absorbed, perhaps unconsciously, by the reader and are remembered as well as those presented by Gower. In a way this is a literary device for teaching unsuspecting people who might balk at reading material with an expressed educational purpose.

There is wide range in the type of tale told by both of these authors--religious, magical, classical, Arthurian, and animal stories. Gower and Chaucer, however, produced different tones or moods, even when telling the same tale. The lover and the confessor in the Confessio are always serious. There are few touches of humor in the conversation or in the tales, which are told in a straight-forward manner with ever so few interruptions to interject any outburst of emotion on the part of the narrator or the listener. This does not mean that the reader is not aroused by feelings of fear, pity, love, or disgust, as the situation may demand; but these must be innate emotions in a sensitive reader, for they are not forced upon him by the narrator. This is quite like life when one is forced to react to a situation on his own, uninfluenced and unaided by any type of propaganda.

Chaucer's characters are, at times, serious, but for the most part they are a jovial gathering on a holiday.

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82 Chaucer also introduces a number of fabliaux, by which Gower was probably shocked, although a number of Gower's tales are no better from the moral point of view.
They laugh with and at one another, argue among themselves, and even come to blows on occasion. Since they want to be entertained, not taught, they are easily swayed by a persuasive narrator who shouts in apostrophes or rhetorical questions about the unjustness of a situation. They are ready to laugh, to cry, or to hang the villain as urged by the narrator. Such obvious attempts to induce a desired reaction may give one the impression that he need be only a sponge soaking up the narrator's convictions. Nevertheless these displays, as well as Chaucer's observances of the effects of the tales on the pilgrims, are some of the highlights which have made Chaucer famous for his ability to depict a variety of tones and moods.

The fourth major difference one notices between the writings of Gower and Chaucer is in the social and professional classification of the characters they used. Look at the characters in the two frames, for instance. In Gower's frame are a classical goddess, a priest, and a poet; each is quite honorable and would be accepted in the highest of aristocratic circles. On the other hand, of all of Chaucer's pilgrims only the knight and his son and the truly religious personages could possibly be considered socially acceptable by court society. All of the remaining members of the group belong to the professional and laboring classes. Some of these people are completely devoid of the
gentilesse" which Chaucer found so necessary, but they are types found in the total society. This same observation applies to the tales told. Whenever possible Chaucer selects commoners for his characters, whereas Gower uses aristocrats. This is apparent in the stories studied in this paper. In "Virginia" the same character is a king's brother to Gower and a churl to Chaucer; in "Florent" Gower's young man is noble and truly knightly whereas Chaucer's is merely a "lusti" bachelor; Gower's lady is an enchanted Sicilian princess rather than the poor, low-born woman with magical powers whom Chaucer describes; in "Phoebus and Cornide" the lover, who causes the disaster, is a passing knight in Gower's version, but he is the town knave in Chaucer's. Not only does Chaucer select many low-born characters, but he often stresses the baseness of their temperaments, whereas Gower tries to find the best in any situation. To Gower Cornide was a slightly promiscuous maiden; to Chaucer she was an adulteress. The behaviour of the young knight who accused Constance of Hermengild's murder was explained by Gower as a case of love turned to hate because he had wanted to marry Constance; Chaucer's knight is avenging his hurt pride because Constance had refused his dishonorable advances. In the same tale Gower finds a thoughtful messenger (hoping for a reward, it is true) taking the news of Maurice's birth to Donegild:
Chaucer stresses only the drunkenness of this messenger and the unattractiveness of his appearance when he is asleep.

To Gower, base deeds from baseborn people are to be expected and are not worth mentioning; he prefers to point out that even nobly-born people who do not avoid the seven sins are capable of vile actions. Chaucer expected the nobility to act nobly\(^{83}\) and accepted the belief that the baseborn would probably be foul, worthless ne'er-do-wells. The difference lies in what Chaucer feels is more important than birth: this is nobleness of character, a quality which he terms *gentilesse*. To Chaucer, a character possessing this quality, regardless of his birth or situation, is worthy of the respect of all men and of having a chance for happiness in this life. Without it, being high-born is no saving grace. It is about this quality that the old hag ably lectures her young knight in the "Wife of Bath's Tale"; it is this quality which is completely absent in the judge in the "Physican's Tale" and all of the characters in the "Manciple's Tale." This, of all the wise sayings and moral ideas used by Chaucer, seems to be the main point he is trying to make in the *Canterbury Tales*. While this idea, in theory, is older than Christianity, Chaucer is the first

\(^{83}\)He could not, however, resist pointing out their frailties when they failed to do so.
poet who writes of it in a manner that would really have meaning to a vast number of the English people.

The last point of comparison to be made in this conclusion deals with the audience for whom each man was writing. Both, of course, wrote for the court, hoping to please the royalty and aristocracy. Gower told them tales of nobles who were worthy and of nobles who failed to live up to their heritage. He would use no word or character or story that could possibly be offensive to such high-minded people. Chaucer took another tack. He told beautiful, pious tales, but he also told tales which ranged to the extremely vulgar (with appropriate warnings for any who might be offended). Chaucer knew human nature, and he instinctively knew that almost all people have a secret desire to read even the most indiscreet tales although they may try to hide their feelings by feigning indignation.

People have not changed. Modern trends indicate that sordid tales usually out-sell the serious, educational ones and that illustrating the seamy side of life is one way to create a best-seller. Perhaps Chaucer included a few of these "attention-getters" in an attempt to attract a wider audience for his book.

Even these tales have a purpose. Some, such as the Manciple's tale, have a moral; others expand Chaucer's description of a definite character or convey his opinion of a social group.
Chaucer, too, had more foresight than Gower. Gower knew times were changing; he showed this in his use of the English language. However, he refused to believe that the old order, the aristocracy, would or could be replaced by commoners. Correspondingly he ignored the middle and lower classes, both as subject material and as an audience. Perhaps, too, he did not really know these classes except in a stereotyped manner, as Europeans know our American Indians. Chaucer had worked in various capacities in which he had met commoners, had known them as individuals. This gave him a vast storehouse of knowledge from which to draw. He not only saw the coming of the era of middle class rule; he accepted it and prepared for it. The Canterbury Tales would appeal to all classes. The royalty could speak with pride of the knight and look down on the riff-raff pilgrims. The commoners could feel a kinship with the Wife of Bath, the seaman, or the feuding miller and reeve; they could laugh at the snips Chaucer took at the prioress. One could almost say that there was someone for everyone. And the tales, too, were not written for one class. They neither praise nor condemn people as groups; the characters gain merit only by good deeds or by cleverness. Probably more than anything else this has taken the usual medieval stuffiness out of Chaucer's work.

The sad and unfair aspect of a comparison of the
Confessio Amantis and the Canterbury Tales is that the latter has no equal. Its excellence seems to detract from any work compared with it, seems to make any other work appear shallow and pale. Frequently the merits of the second work go unnoticed. Two hundred years after Chaucer's death a similar situation arose. Shakespeare's tragedies so far surpassed those of his contemporaries that they frequently obscured the merits of the others. Scholars and students of this period have, however, been more open-minded about the Elizabethan tragedies. No one would consider ignoring Marlowe just because he is not superior. So too, Gower should not be ignored even though he cannot equal Chaucer. Had Chaucer written only the Legend of Good Women or the House of Fame, Gower's English work would have been favorably compared with them, and his name would be both better known to the student and less maligned by the scholar.
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