Abstract

“Moral Gower” he was called by friend and sometime rival Geoffrey Chaucer, and his “Confessio Amantis” has been viewed as an uncomplicated analysis of the universe, combining erotic narratives with ethical guidance and political commentary. Diane Watt offers the first sustained reading of John Gower’s “Confessio” to argue that this early vernacular text offers no real solutions to the ethical problems it raises—and in fact actively encourages perverse readings.

Drawing on a combination of queer and feminist theory, ethical criticism, and psychoanalytic, historicist, and textual criticism, Watt focuses on the language, sex, and politics in Gower’s writing. How, she asks, is Gower’s “Confessio” related to contemporary controversies over vernacular translation and debates about language politics? How is Gower’s treatment of rhetoric and language gendered and sexualized, and what bearing does this have on the ethical and political structure of the text? What is the relationship between the erotic, ethical, and political sections of “Confessio Amantis”? Watt demonstrates that Gower engaged in the sort of critical thinking more commonly associated with Chaucer and William Langland at the same time that she contributes to modern debates about the ethics of criticism.

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