



THE PROBLEM OF GENIUS'S INTENT

IN

JOHN GOWER'S

CONFESSIO AMANTIS

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BY

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To my mother,

And to the memory of my father.

So it goes.

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SUMMARY

In book I of the Confessio Amantis, Genius undertakes to tell Amans of the vices which may be associated with the rites of secular love (I, 253-80); however, at the end of the shrift Genius claims that secular love is essentially sinful -- at least as the lover experiences it (VIII, 2084-91). We further learn that Amans is an old man and no longer able to fulfil love's requirements (VIII, 2417-20). It is possible to view the confession as an elaborate device intended by Venus and Genius to deter Amans from his quest. This raises the possibility that Genius's exempla have two functions: overtly, under the pretence of assisting Amans, they serve to explicate the dangers which may await an unwary lover; covertly, in order to discourage Amans, they denigrate the value of secular love by suggesting a necessary connection between it and sin, and (more directly) they also show Amans examples of 'unkindely' love which parallel his own 'unnatural' desires. My reading sees the Confessio Amantis as an organised and purposeful work, and not as the loose collection of fables it has sometimes been labelled.

The thesis begins with a brief discussion of how some readers have viewed the form and purpose of Gower's poem. In chapter 2, I discuss the basics of my method of reading with examples taken from book I; in

chapter 3, I give a close study of book IV (sloth). In chapters 4 and 5, I deal with two areas of the poem which have been traditionally viewed as problems: the 'Education of Alexander' (book VII); and Genius's use of incest as a topic for his tales. I argue that both of these apparently anomalous occurrences in the poem are part of a consistent purpose: incest represents the worst of secular behaviour; and the 'Education of Alexander' proposes an elaborate system of secular control for Amans to follow -- with particular emphasis on the idea of chastity. My thesis concludes with a brief reflection on the relevance of the Prologue and 'Epilogue' to the dialogue between Amans and Genius.

Declaration

This thesis does not contain any material which has been previously presented by me for the award of a degree or diploma from any university. To the best of my knowledge I have not incorporated the work of another writer except where proper acknowledgement is given in the body of the text. I give my permission for this thesis to be made available for loan if it is accepted for the award of Master of Arts.

Dallas Simpson
28 August 1989

Preface

Thanks are due to my primary supervisor, Dr T.L. Burton, for his patience and support. During the preparation of this thesis he made many hundreds of written comments and emendations, and for 6 months these were mailed to me as he undertook study leave in America and England. Further thanks are owed to Dr K. Magarey who read and commented upon chapters 1 to 4 while engaged with his own substantial projects. I am grateful to Shirely Bowbridge and Maria Cominetti of the English Department Office for their friendly help, and to the Department in general for the provision of word processing facilities.

My final thanks are to Annely Aeuckens, my wife, who completed her own Master of Arts thesis while I wrote this one. She would agree with me, I think, that the Wife of Bath was wrong.

All quotations from the Confessio Amantis are taken from the standard edition by G.C. Macaulay, any opinions of Macaulay are also taken from this work. Robinson's edition is the source for all Chaucer quotations.