

## CRACKS AND FISSURES: GOWER'S POETICS ON THE EDGE

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### *Abstract*

This essay examines Gower's oft-discussed flexible or situational ethics with a focus on the way in which he positions his poems, especially the *Confessio Amantis* between several different elements. His multi-linguality has concerned readers for a long time, as have his idea of the "middle weie" and, more recently, the way in which he does not offer an overall fixed moral sense but rather focuses on the contradictions inherent in the human condition. The central thesis of the essay is that Gower uses all of these elements to create a poetic that is placed on the edge rather than in a commonplace centre. It is here that we can see cracks and fissures emerge in Gower's work, and it is here that we can begin to better understand his poetics.

*Keywords:* *Confessio Amantis*, *Vox Clamantis*, moral agenda, manuscripts, Chaucer.

At the end of Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*, Virginius presents his daughter Virginia with the unenviable choice of either living in shame with a corrupt judge or dying a virtuous death. In actual fact, Virginia does not have a choice in the matter, but the Physician at least creates the semblance of some sort of freely willed acquiescence on her part. In no small part due to the constraints imposed upon Chaucer and his narrator by their source material, the tale ends when Virginius "Hir heed of smoot, and by the top it hente/And to the juge he gan it to presente" (*CT* VI.255-56).<sup>1</sup> As horrific as the deed undoubtedly is, the scene as a whole is rather clinical in its presentation. The conversation between father and daughter is neatly confined to the privacy of their domestic home, and, by the time it is presented to the judge in the open space of the public arena, Virginia's head has become more a token of Virginius' desperate attempt

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Chaucer's works are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer* (Benson 1987).

to keep his and his family's honour intact than a part of the mutilated body of a young woman.

Together with numerous other stories from the storehouse of classical and medieval literary tradition, the story of Virginius and Virginia can also be found in John Gower's encyclopaedic *Confessio Amantis*, a poem that, at least in some surviving manuscripts, wants to motivate Chaucer to complete his life's work. After some 30,000 lines of verse, Gower has Venus admonish Amans, who by now has been identified as the aging poet himself, to:

[...] And gretwel Chaucer whan ye mete,  
 As mi disciple ad 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 fulfil is overal:  
 Wherof to him in special  
 Above alle othre I am most holde.  
 For thi now in hise daies olde  
 Thow shalt him telle this message,  
 That he upon his latere 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 thi shrift above,  
 So that mi Court it mai recorde. (CA VIII.2941-57\*)<sup>2</sup>

There is a sense here that Gower is in competition with Chaucer, who is described in this passage as Venus' court poet and whose texts can be found all across England. But Gower has gained the upper hand at this point, having completed his shrift and being held up as an example as his presumably more reluctant fellow aging poet. The exact nature of both the relationship between these two writers and the precise connection between *Confessio* and whichever of Chaucer's texts would be the "Testament of Love," have long been the subject of critical attention, but the current essay is not concerned with the details of this intertextual and interpersonal relationship.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it builds on the fact that there clearly is a connection between Chaucer and Gower, as well as their respective literary corpora. The case of the Virginia story is a

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Gower's works are taken from Macaulay (1899-1902).

<sup>3</sup> The list of studies of the relationship between Gower and Chaucer is long and comprehensive. Some notable recent highlights include Allen (1997), Lindeboom (2007), and Bowers (2010).

particularly useful starting point, given that it is one of the stories that both Chaucer and Gower choose to incorporate into their own story collections.

Gower's version of the Virginia story appears at the end of Book VII, the only one of the eight books of the *Confessio* that deals specifically with politics in the form of the education of princes. The climactic scene of Gower's "Tale of Virginia" is intriguingly different from one we find in Chaucer. In the middle of a public gathering, Gower's Virginius removes his daughter from the power struggle when:

A naked swerd he pulleth oute,  
The which amonges al the route  
He threste thurgh his dowhter side,  
And with his swerd droppende of blod,  
The which withinne his douhter stod. (*CA* VII.5243-45; 5263-64)

Not only does Gower confine the scene to the public square, "amonges al the route," he also emphasises both the phallic nature of Virginius' action and the messiness of it all for want of a better word with Virginia standing in a pool of her own blood. Of course, Genius, the narrator of Gower's exempla in the *Confessio*, is no physician, which may account for the profusion of blood compared to Chaucer's Physician's clinical operation, but there is more to this pair of scenes from different writers than training and professional procedure.

While both scenes depict the tragic and quite definitely final end of the life of a young woman, they nevertheless mark the beginning of my investigation in Gower's poetics on the edge insofar as they illustrate Gower's marked preference, especially when compared to his contemporary Chaucer, for ever so slightly uncomfortable images and events and then pushing them to quite an extreme level of shocking detail, if not quite literally over the edge of normally acceptable behaviour. Alongside Virginius, we have infanticide, incest, duplicity and other kinds of cruelty. Basically Gower covers all the aspects to which Chaucer's Man of Law objects when he praises Chaucer, because:

But certainly no word ne writeth he  
Of thilke wikke ensample of Canacee,  
That loved hir owene brother synfully;  
Of swiche cursed stories I sey fy!  
Or ellis of Tyro Appollonius,  
How that the cursed kyng Antiochus  
Brafte his doghter of hir maydenhede,  
That is so horrible a tale for to rede,  
Whan he hir threw upon the pavement.  
And therefore he, of ful avysement,  
Nolde nevere write, in none of his sermons,  
Of swiche unkynde abhomynaciouns;  
Ne I wol noon reherce, if that I may. (*CT* II.77-89)

Gower's *Confessio*, quite certainly the main object of the Man of Law's animosity, is not for the squeamish. As many readers have pointed out, the Man of Law here illustrates a very gross inability to read outside of a black-and-white framework in which the texts can indeed be described as abominations.<sup>4</sup> In the real world, however, where things are more grey than black-and-white, Gower can be seen not to be treating his chosen stories in such a way, and the way in which an unsophisticated reader like Chaucer's Man of Law can misread these stories sheds light on the way in which Gower situates himself on the edge between morality and "unkynde abhominaciouns."

Gower's positioning of his texts both within the cultural environment of his contemporary England and in relation to Chaucer has been the subject of a number of insightful readings. The complicated moral matrixes Gower creates in, for, and through his texts are frequently at the core of these readings, ranging from María Bullón-Fernández's (2000) extensive examination of father-daughter relationships in the *Confessio* to the detailed studies of Gower's ethical poetics offered by J. Allan Mitchell (2004). Chaucer's dedication of his *Troilus and Criseyde* to "moral Gower"<sup>5</sup> has for a long time lumbered Gower with a straightforwardly moral label, but this has been frequently and usefully queried in recent years, not least by Diane Watt's (2003) *Amoral Gower*. Watt's decision to describe Gower as amoral rather than moral or immoral provides a much-needed alternative to this traditional dichotomy, although this approach is not mutually exclusive of the studies by Kurt Olsson (1992), James Simpson (1995) and R. F. Yeager (1984), to name a few, all of which go to considerable length to illustrate the sophistication with which Gower creates a complicated moral framework in his poetry. This article aims to take its cue from this multi-faceted body of readings of Gower's moral poetry by pursuing an examination of how Gower uses all levels of his texts, from content to multi-linguality and manuscript layout, for his location of his poetry on the edge between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

In this sense, there is not just one moral message in Gower's poetry, but rather several, often competing, messages. On the one hand, Gower finds these moral messages on the very edge of what is permissible, leading to comments such as the one by Chaucer's Man of Law quoted above. Only by constantly coming up against the edge of morality, and by frequently striving to at least indirectly rationalise and explain otherwise morally dubious behaviour can Gower outline his own moral stance(s). Gower's edginess, as it is understood here, does indeed not simply apply or relate to morals and ethics. Of the major

<sup>4</sup> For readings of the Man of Law's reading or mis-reading of *Confessio*, see especially Allen (1997) and Watt (2003:8-11).

<sup>5</sup> For a useful analysis of Chaucer's dedication of *Troilus*, see Yeager (1984).

Ricardian writers, he alone wrote not in one but in three different languages. Gower started off writing in French, with the *Mirour de L'omme* addressing the origins of sin and beginning to address the far from ideal state of society in the England of the 1370s. This work only survives in one single manuscript, discovered almost accidentally by Gower's great Victorian editor, Macaulay.<sup>6</sup>

More interesting to me in my account of Gower's edginess is his Latin poetry, most notably *Vox Clamantis*, another poem not only addressing, but very outspokenly critiquing the ills of society. *Vox* was first completed in the late 1370s, but after the Rising of 1381, Gower added an opening book dealing with the cataclysmic events of that summer and, later still, changed passages exempting the young king Richard II to a much more outspoken criticism of Richard in the latter part of the reign.<sup>7</sup> In this poem, Gower not only reveals the ills affecting his contemporary society, but he does so in a way that situates his speaker on the edge between past and present, good and wrong, righteous and sinful. Gower himself models his narrator on John of Pathmos, the author of the biblical apocalypse:

Insula quem Pathmose suscepit in Apocalipsi,  
Cuius ege nomen gesto, gubernet opus.<sup>8</sup> (I. Prol. 57-58)

In more than one sense, the whole poem is situated on the edge between various dichotomies, with Gower not so much seriously attempting to right the wrongs but rather striving to highlight the very fact that there is an ever-widening chasm between the different states or social ethics.<sup>9</sup> In the last instance, only Gower (or, rather, his speaker) can inhabit that edgy space, with the vast majority of his contemporaries being squarely placed on the "wrong" side of the divide and only Gower himself being able to reach across to both the bad and the good sides of the divide.

Gower's major English poem, *Confessio Amantis*, then picks up the thread of both the *Mirour* and the *Vox*, containing not only a detailed treatment of the

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<sup>6</sup> Gower's French texts have enjoyed a welcome increase in critical attention in recent years. For insightful examples of work currently being done in this area, see Butterfield (2003, 2004) as well as Yeager (2004, 2005 and 2006). The multilingualism of late medieval England has been the subject of several book-length studies, with Davidson (2010) being particularly noteworthy for its location of Gower as part of a much wider tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Gower's perceived change of allegiance from Richard II to Henry IV has produced a number of insightful studies. For examples, see Staley (2000) and Saul (2010).

<sup>8</sup> "May the one whom the Isle of Pathmos received in the Apocalypse, and whose name I bear, guide this work." The translation is taken from Stockton (1962).

<sup>9</sup> Useful readings of *Vox* in this light include Peck (1989), Yeager (1989), Salisbury (1998), and Urban (2009).

seven deadly sins, but also addressing the increasingly deteriorating state of society, political rule and governance and a good deal of interhuman relations. The thematic similarities between Gower's three major poems have not escaped the attention of critics, and it would be fair to assume that many Gowerians remember a similar experience to the one Tim W. Machan describes:

The first time I heard the name John Gower, I was an undergraduate and aspiring medievalist deep in conversation with one of my professors. Desperately trying to convey maturity and professionalism, and secretly grateful simply to receive the professor's special attention, I tried to laugh at the humorous moments, nod thoughtfully at the thoughtful ones, and generally give the impression that I really knew what the conversation was about—and this despite the fact that all I'd really read from the Middle Ages was *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain* (both in translation), the *Canterbury Tales*, and *Sir Orfeo*. Then it happened. "Well, there's John Gower, of course," he said, at which I of course nodded, "who wrote three long poems in different languages, although some people say he actually wrote the same poem three times, once in each language." Gauging my response carefully, I smiled and nodded until the professor safely moved on to other topics, leaving me, and my cover, intact. (2006:1)

It is worth quoting this passage in full, as it not only mentions the perceived repetitiveness of Gower's poetry across three languages, but also the still-not-quite eradicated marginal status of Gower in the canon of late medieval literature.

The issue of Gower's literary languages is not as straightforward as it seems, however. While it is true that we encounter Gower's poems in French, Latin and English, especially in the case of the *Confessio*, Latin and English co-exist, or even compete on the pages of the surviving manuscripts. Over the course of several articles, Siân Echard has shown how the programme of Latin summaries and glosses not merely complements the English that forms the bulk of the poem but rather actively complicates the moral agenda of the poem as a whole. She describes hers as an "effort to consider the totality of the bibliographic elements and their effects on first reception of Gower's work" (1999:60). The result of Echard's work has been a realization that "Latin, presented in the work as the poet's helper, is in fact a focus for instability, both in the text itself and in the manuscripts, whose variations magnify the discontinuities in their source" (1998:3). While this is not the place to retrace the various arguments about the Latin and English parts of the *Confessio*, it is important to note that describing the work as "Gower's English poem" is, in fact, quite inappropriate because the poem amply illustrates Gower's command and awareness of the different languages of late medieval England. This allows him to write a poem that is often confusingly situated on the edge between Latin and English, as well as between competing moral messages.

Notwithstanding the bilingual dimension of the *Confessio*, Gower is very interested in a dialogic relationship between moral conundrums and human experience. The *Confessio* is a poem whose main structural centre, beyond the overarching structuring principle of the seven deadly sins, is the confessional dialogue between Amans and Genius, and it is this dialogue that enables Gower to situate his ethics and morals on the edge between Amans and Genius. In addition, the *Confessio* is constantly emphasising written tradition. It starts by referring to the books that tell “of hem that written ous tofore” (*CA* Prol.1) and throughout the poem, Genius constantly refers to books, chronicles, old stories in general. Thus, we have a poem that not only presents us with two figures engaged in a confessional dialogue, but also focuses our attention on the ways in which this confessional dialogue is in constant contact with texts that have been written over the course of human history. In this sense, the poem is engaged in a programme of drawing together disparate threads from across time and across cultures, all of which converge in the space of the poem, which in return becomes a space that is constantly teetering on the edge between past, present and future, irrepressibly shifting and moving as both writer, speakers and readers are engaged in a programme of fixing individual conclusions in time and space, only to see them be washed away at the turn of a page.

While author-centred criticism is still quite unfashionable, Gower's is a case in point for at least a limited consideration of an author's life for our reading of his texts.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Chaucer, who spent most of his life living and working in London, Gower comes from obscure origins and, in the 1370s, settles in the Priory of St Mary Overeys, a space today occupied by Southwark Cathedral, where Gower's tomb still stands. Much work has been done on Southwark as a legal grey area, and a liminal space in relation to medieval London. Situated just south of the Thames, in the area leading up to London bridge, medieval Southwark seems to have been a haven for the outcasts of London and medieval society as a whole. It is striking that Gower, the poet so often, if misleadingly, labelled “moral Gower” would choose to live among the drinking houses and brothels of Southwark, but this space could actually have fostered the kind of edgy poetry that is the subject of this essay. Medieval Southwark is, basically, a space where morality and ethics constantly clash, and the edges of the permissible are constantly floating to the surface of everyday life.

One of the cataclysmic events of the late fourteenth century a reader cannot escape when reading Gower's poetry, especially the first book of *Vox Clamantis*, is the Rising of 1381 and its effect on the society and culture that

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<sup>10</sup> What follows can only be a cursory overview of this topic. For a wider examination of Gower and his residence in Southwark, see Epstein (2004).

nourished Gower, Chaucer and their contemporaries. In the *Vox*, Gower conjures up such a nightmarish image of the Rising that it is hard to imagine he was not as obsessed with the Rising, its origins and its aftermath as many a postmedieval scholar has been since. The Rising resulted in a range of illuminating historical evidence, much of which betrays a very strong sense of a desperate attempt by the ruling classes to contain, demonise and condemn the rebels. The rolls of the King's Bench contain, among many other cases, one case that is relevant for my reading of Gower on the edge, as it shows how Southwark was constructed by texts authorised by the ruling elite.

Johanna [...] went as the chief perpetrator and leader (*principalis factor et ductor*) of a great society of rebellious evildoers from Kent [...] to the Savoy in the county of Middlesex and, as an enemy of the king (*ut inimica regis*), burned the said manor; she seized a chest containing £1,000 and more belonging to John, duke of Lancaster, and then she put the said chest into a boat on the Thames and made off with it, all the way to Southwark, where she divided the gold between herself and others. (Federico 2001:168)

The point I want to make here is not so much the fact that these rebels ransacked the Savoy, but that we are told explicitly that the stolen chest was loaded onto a boat, transported to Southwark, and there divided among Johanna and an un-defined group of "others." From this, it would seem that, yes, possessions are being stolen in London during the Rising, but the rebels still need the legally diffuse space of Southwark to actually go about distributing their new-found, and ill-begotten possessions. Johanna and her rebellious evildoers are, of course, not just having to tread carefully in the face of London authorities, but they also need to watch out for other rebels. According to some sources, the rebels did, in fact, strive to contain criminal excesses during the rising, executing on the spot those who they found to be stealing from the Savoy and other places in London.<sup>11</sup> Johanna and her evildoers thus seem to be aware of Southwark as a place on the edge of surveillance, a safe haven where going up against the edge of the permissible and occasionally overstepping this edge is indeed possible.

There is a further interesting link between the above passage and Gower's *Confessio*. The first, and most widely copied version of the poem has one of the most puzzling and most often puzzled-over scenes in all of Gower's poetry. Getting into the stride of the poem, Gower presents his readers with the following:

I thenke and have it understonde,  
As it bifel upon a tyde,

<sup>11</sup> Crane (1992) and Strohm (1992) are still the benchmarks for theoretically informed analyses of the role of writing and authority during the Rising of 1381.



As thing which scholde tho bityde,  
 Under the toun of newe Troye,  
 Which took of Brut his ferste joye,  
 In Temse whan it was flowende  
 As I by bote cam rowende,  
 So as Fortune hirty me sette,  
 My liege lord par chaunce I mette;  
 And so bifel, as I cam neigh,  
 Out of my bot, whan he me seigh,  
 He bad me come into his barge.  
 And whan I was with him at large,  
 Amonges othre thinges seyde  
 He hath this charge upon me leyde,  
 And bad me doo my busynesse  
 That to his hihe worthinesse  
 Som newe thing I scholde booke,  
 That he himself it mighte looke  
 After the forme of my wrytyng. (*CA Pr.\*34-53*)

This allegedly chance meeting between poet and king on the Thames turns the river into a meeting place, with Gower (and the king and his entourage) once again placing himself on the edge, this time on the edge between the City of London and his living quarters in Southwark. It is on this edge that Gower receives the purported royal commission for the poem, and it is significant that not only does Gower row about on the river, but he also has to cross yet another threshold when he leaves his own boat for Richard's barge. It is not central to the argument put forward here whether this meeting actually took place or is simply a poetic mechanism for Gower. Much has been written about this commissioning scene on the river,<sup>12</sup> and for the purposes of my argument, the important element is the locality of the encounter, not so much the encounter itself.

Gower does, in fact, have a tendency to write about London from the outside, quite frequently relegating it to the edge of his field of vision. For example, in Book I of the *Vox*, he describes how

On my right then I thought I saw New Troy, which was powerless as a widow. Ordinarily surrounded by walls, it lay exposed as a widow, and the city gate could not shut its bars. A thousand wolves and bears approaching with the wolves determined to go out of the woods to the homes of the city. (*Vox I.xiii.879-84*)

<sup>12</sup> For a sample of recent work on this scene and its relevance and implications for our understanding of Gower's text, see Staley (2000), Grady (2002), and Coleman (2007).

London, in the guise of New Troy, is here presented as a shadow of its former self, rising out of the rubble of the Rising (when it is actually being razed to the ground), and under sustained attack from the rebels turned animals. In this instance, the edge of the city, the edge of civilisation, cannot be upheld, and the threshold is forcibly crossed by the rebels.<sup>13</sup> Later in the poem, after some time spent sailing aimlessly on a boat, Gower's narrator makes his landfall on an unidentified landmass. Enquiring about this new land, Gower learns that:

This once used to be called the island of Brut, an exile. Diana gave it to him out of pity. The people of this land are wild. Their way of life involves far more quarreling than love. [...] [Yet] I think there is no worthier people under the sun, if there were mutual love among them. (*Vox* I.xx.1963-82)

In these few lines, much of Gower's interest in edges, crossings and extremes is evident. Tracing its origin back to the exilic wanderer Brutus, Britain is inhabited by a wild group of people who could, nonetheless, be the most worthy people under the sun, if only they could mend their ways and lead lives of mutual respect and love. Already, we can see how Gower's interest in the shortcomings of society and the ideal which they do not fulfill features in his poetry.

At the opening of the *Confessio*, we come across Gower's famous account of what this new poem of his is going to be, what it is going to do. He says that he:

Wolde go the middel weie  
And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,  
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,  
That of the lasse or of the more  
Som man mai lyke of that I wryte. (*CA* I.17-21)

In these oft-quoted lines, Gower is situating his *bok* quite specifically on the edge between *lust* and *lore*, and as he proceeds with the text, it soon becomes apparent that this is also an edge between good and bad, virtue and evil. Much later, when Genius lectures Amans on rhetoric, we read that:

Logique hath eke in his degré  
Betwen the trouthe and the falshode  
The pleine words for to shod. (*CA* VII.1532-34)

And further that:

For if the wordes semen goode

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<sup>13</sup> A useful reading of the role of Londoners in opening the city to the rebels can be found in Turner (2003).

And ben wel spoke at mannes ere,  
 Whan that ther is no trouthe there,  
 Thei don ful ofte gret decepte. (CA VII.1550-53)

And finally:

The wordes ben of sondri sectes,  
 Of evele and eke of goode also;  
 The wordes maken frend of fo,  
 And fo of frend, and pes of werre,  
 And werre of pes, and out of herre  
 The word this worldes cause entriketh,  
 And reconsileth whan him liketh. (CA VII.1572-78)

In these passages, Gower's text is very much aware of the danger of misleading speech. We can also see him continue his opening image of the *middle weie* from lust and lore to good and bad. It is striking that, in the last passage quoted above, we find a sequence of mirrored binary pairs (frend/fo-fo/frend; pes/werre-werre/pes) that in each case go from positive to negative and then back to positive via the negative. At least on a cursory reading this works. However, if we look a bit more closely at these pairs, Gower is actually leaving a lingering aftertaste of negativity: words make *frend* of *fo*, but then make *fo* of *frend*, and similarly with *werre* of *pes*. Gower does show us the near and far sides of the edge on which his text positions itself, but, in keeping with his general focus on division and deterioration, he makes sure that the negative connotations linger in our readerly imagination.

Turning my attention back to the *Confessio*, it is now worth to highlight very briefly a few instances of physical and moral crossing of lines in Gower's "English" poem. The first one occurs in the "Tale of the Trojan Horse," and it is presented in two steps. First, we hear how:

For whan the Grekshadde al assaied,  
 And founde that be no bataille  
 Ne be no sieghe it myhte availe  
 The toun to winne thurgh prouesse,  
 This vice feigned of simplece  
 Thurgh sleyhte of Calcas and of Crise  
 It wan be such a maner wise:  
 An hors of bras thei let do forge,  
 Of such entaile, of such a forge,  
 That in this world was nevere man  
 That such an other werk began. (CA I.1080-90)

Obviously, this is quite a well-known story, but it is interesting how Gower here emphasises the failure of the extended siege of Troy as the reason why they eventually resort to trickery. Where prowess fails, trickery prevails, illustrating

how the overstepping of a moral edge can have more severe consequences than the creation of a physical edge between two opposing armies, or, in this case, an army on the outside and a society enclosed by city walls.

The Trojans, then, obviously fail to detect this ruse and,  
 Tho was ther joyey nowh begunne,  
 For Troie in gret devocioun  
 Cam also with processioun  
 Agein this noble sacrificise  
 With gret honour, and in this wise  
 Unto the gates thei it broghte.  
 Bot of here entré whan thei soghte,  
 The gates weren al to smale;  
 And therupon was many a tale,  
 Bot for the worschipe of Minerve,  
 To whom thei comen for to serve,  
 Thei of the toun, whiche understode  
 That al this thing was do for goode,  
 For pes, wherof that thei ben glade,  
 The gates that Neptunus made  
 A thousand wynter thertofore,  
 Thei have anon to broke and tore;  
 The stronge walles down thei bete,  
 So that in to the large strete  
 This hors with gret solempnité  
 Was broght withinne the cité,  
 And offred with gret reverence,  
 Which was to Troie an evidence  
 Of love and pes for everemo. (CA I.1139-61)

The Trojans fail to detect the trickery behind the horse, illustrating the ways in which not just they but also we as readers have to constantly endeavour to read both sides of the story from our own position on the edge between the two. But not only this, the Trojans also undo the edge that has for ages separated them and their city from the outside world. Since this new element, the horse, is too big for the city gates, they tear down the gates that have kept them safe. By doing this, they are not only extending (or breaking) the edge between them and the outside, but they are also letting the outside in, with consequences that are well known, but interestingly not really all that central to Gower's poem. Told as an exemplum for hypocrisy, the tale foregrounds the crossing of a moral edge or line, with the physical effects being relegated to a side-effect of this violation.

Finally, let me turn to the "Tale of Florent," an *exemplum* for obedience in love, told by genius in Book I of the *Confessio*. Again, a comparison with the corresponding tale from Chaucer's oeuvre is in order. While this essay opened

with a comparison of Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and Gower's "Tale of Virginia," the "Tale of Florent" is linked to *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, most probably the most widely-read of the *Canterbury Tales*, together with *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, we encounter a rapist knight who eventually gets rewarded for mending his ways, although there is actually not that much tangible proof that he has indeed mended his ways. Chaucer's tale gets underway with the following scene:

And so bifel that this kyng Arthour  
 Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor,  
 That on a day cam ridynge fro ryver,  
 And happed that, allone as he was born,  
 He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,  
 Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,  
 By verray force, he rafte hire maydenheed. (CT III.882-88)

The key element in this scene is the shockingly voluntary nature of the knight's actions. Nobody forces him to rape the young woman, and there are no mitigating circumstances anywhere in sight. Nevertheless, he does not, in the last instance, have to face the consequences of his actions, although we can assume that the quest imposed on him to find the answer to the question of what women most desire must be quite a daunting ordeal for him. Still, he is saved in the end when he gives a sufficient answer and is then further rewarded when the old hag turns into a young and beautiful woman.

As is the case with the respective versions of the Virginia story, Gower presents his version of the Loathly Lady story differently. This is the scene in Gower corresponding to the rape and court case in Gower:

For so it fell that ilke stounde  
 That he hath with a dedly wounde  
 Feihtende, his oghne hondes slain  
 Branchus, which to the capitain  
 Was sone and heir, wherof ben wrothe  
 The fader and the moder bothe.  
 That knyht Branchus was of his hond  
 The worthieste of al his lond,  
 And fain thei wolden do vengance  
 Upon Florent, bot remembrance  
 That thei toke of his worthinesse  
 Of knyhtod and of gentillesse,  
 And how he stod of cousinage  
 To th'emperour, made hem assuage,  
 And dorsten noght slen him for fere.  
 In gret desputeisoun thei were  
 Among hemself, what was the beste.  
 Ther was a lady, the slyheste

Of alle that men knewe tho,  
 So old sche myhte unethes go,  
 And was grant dame unto the dede:  
 And sche with that began to rede,  
 And seide how sche wol bringe him inne,  
 That sche schal him to dethe winne  
 Al only of his oghne grant,  
 Thurgh strengthe of verray covenant  
 Withoute blame of eny wiht. (CA I.1425-51)

The knight, Florent, is here not blamed at all. It just so happens that he kills Branchus in a fight, not knowing who he is and acting entirely in self-defence. It is the grandmother who is at the centre of blame. The deadly wound does not matter, but the grandmother's agenda of revenge is what gets the tale going. For a poet who quite often abhors chivalric violence and warfare, this seems striking, and Gower is here situating his tale on the edge of what is acceptable human behaviour (as far as he is concerned).<sup>14</sup> Blinded by her understandable anger at her grandson's death, the grandmother is not reading the facts of the situation right.

By the end of the tale, Florent has been rewarded with a beautiful young wife, but over the course of the tale he has had to embark on a similarly frustrating quest to the knight in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. We should, of course, also not forget the fact that, at the very beginning of the tale, Florent has to leave the emperor's court, making him an exile. As far as Gower's poetics on the edge is concerned, it is important to note that Florent is simultaneously cast adrift from his own social courtly environment and struggling to live up to the courtly and chivalric ideals during his seemingly aimless wanderings that lead to the killing of Branchus. Only at the end does he manage to reconcile in himself and his own conduct the contradictory pressures of the chivalric code insofar as he is acquitted of the murder of Branchus and rewarded with a wife through submission to the old hag's control. "The Tale of Florent" works on a much less grand scale than the sophisticated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but both texts collaborate, at a distance, to highlight the cracks and fissures on the edges of the chivalric code. It is impossible for either Gawain or Florent to perfectly embody the code of chivalry, but their reactions to the pressures of specific situations display the kind of flexibility and creativity that Gower's texts in particular urge upon their readers.

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<sup>14</sup> The argument for Gower's (and Chaucer's) pacifism is put forward in Yeager (1987).

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