

SÁEZ-HIDALGO, Ana & R. F. YEAGER eds. 2014: *John Gower in England and Iberia: Manuscripts, Influences, Reception* (Publications of the John Gower Society 10). Cambridge, D. S. Brewer. pp. x + 335. ISBN: 978-1-84384-320-7. \$99.00.



AT ONE TIME, GOWER HAD TO WRESTLE IN THE MINDS OF modern critics with Chaucer (and to a lesser extent Langland) for his status as an authoritative English poet. This is no longer the case, largely as a result of the determined, evangelical efforts of the John Gower Society. In addition to multiple sessions over many years at the annual Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the society has now hosted three international meetings of its own—Gower “think tanks,” actually—that like the Kalamazoo sessions have generated a substantial corpus of scholarship on the poet. Taking the form of both essay collections and monographs, this criticism rivals and often exceeds in intellectual energy and perspicacity the best that is currently being written about the authors of the *Canterbury Tales* and *Piers the Plowman*.

*John Gower in England and Iberia: Manuscripts, Influences, Reception*, co-edited by R. F. Yeager, founder and president of the Gower Society, and Ana Sáez-Hidalgo, a professor of medieval and early modern English at the University of Valladolid, continues this exemplary scholarly enterprise. The book gathers together the fruits of the Second International Congress of the John Gower Society, held in 2011 in Valladolid, Spain—nineteen essays that began as conference presentations but that have been elaborated and revised for publication here. Each one makes a deliberate and persuasive contribution to our understanding of Gower and his works.

A brief review can only remark on a selection. The most original and compelling material in the book, understandably enough, concerns Gower’s under-examined connections with the Iberian Peninsula. These were the result of migration of a copy of *Confessio Amantis* to Portugal—probably by way of John of Gaunt’s daughter,

Philippa, who between 1387 and 1415 was Portugal's queen—and subsequent translation of Gower's English poem into Portuguese and then Castilian Spanish. Yeager and Sáez-Hidalgo group much of the scholarship in the book related to Portugal and Spain in the volume's second section, "Iberia," but it also extends across their other four subgroupings—on "Manuscripts," "The Classical Tradition," "Economy," and "Reception"—as a persistent (although not exclusive) theme.

The Castilian translation of *Confessio Amantis*, preserved in a single identified manuscript, has been known since the 1930s, when J. M. Manly first brooded on its significance. The Portuguese translation that provoked the Castilian one has likewise been identified in only one copy, a manuscript rediscovered in the late 1990s. The two lead off essays in *Gower in England and Iberia* give these copies minute paleographic and codicological attention. Mauricio Herrero Jiménez's contribution, "Castilian Script in Iberian Manuscripts of the *Confessio Amantis*," compares systematically the different types of professional Gothic book-hands used in copying Madrid, Real Biblioteca MS II-3088, the Portuguese *Livro do Amante*, and Madrid, El Escorial Library MS g-II-19, the Spanish *Confysion del Amante*. Using ample illustration, Herrero Jiménez demonstrates that neither manuscript is a presentation copy. Rather, each was made for private reading, the manuscript of the Portuguese *Livro* probably for a nobleman, "who perhaps was seeking in it a model of ethical and political education and/or romantic diversion" (22)—that is, just the sort of *mistura* of "lore" and "lust" that Gower announces as the aesthetic recipe for his long English poem. In addition to his careful scribal analysis, Herrero Jiménez also points out an intriguing codicological detail of each of Gower's Iberian manuscripts: a Castilian table of contents added at the front of the Portuguese codex and the conjoining in the more modest Spanish one of sections from two different *Confysion* copies. Readership of Iberian translations of the *Confessio*, he concludes, was likely more widespread than the scant survival of two manuscripts indicates.

Further archival investigation, one imagines, will extend our knowledge of the international readership of Gower's poem.

María Luisa López-Vidriero Abelló's essay on "Provenance Interlacing in Spanish Royal Book-Collecting" takes as its focus the status of the Portuguese codex in particular, held in the Spanish Royal Library. Predictably perhaps, López-Vidriero Abelló hypothesizes that this library "played an important role in constructing the image of the monarch" (35). More interestingly, she evaluates the details of certain historical exhibitions and visitations of the library to suggest how its contents and their variable arrangements reflected "royal power, prestige, and accomplishment" (37)—all of these of course themes taken up in the *Confessio*. Her analysis of this point is a useful prolegomenon to López-Vidriero Abelló's discussion of the actual arrival of MS II-3088 in the Royal Library from the personal collection of Count Gondomar, an ambassador of Philip III of Spain to the court of James I of England, who maintained a private library in Valladolid. Moreover, before this transfer, the author shows, the manuscript was owned by Luis de Castilla, son of a dean of Toledo Cathedral, whose humanist leanings (like Gondomar's interest in instruction for princes) link for us by way of a clear archival trail Gower's English work with high Iberian culture.

Other Iberian-themed essays take up more speculative matters. Two, for example, concern the Battle of Nájera, where John of Gaunt and Edward the Black Prince allied in 1367 with Pedro the Cruel of Castile (of Monk's Tale fame) against his brother, Enrique. David R. Carlson connects a letter sent by Edward from the battlefield to his wife, Joan, with the propagandist tonalities of a number of late medieval texts, among them Gower's *Cronica Tripertita* of 1400 in praise of the English usurper, Henry IV. Fernando Galván investigates how the 1367 engagement established a tighter nexus of connections between England, Castile, and Portugal than we might suppose and that ultimately led to the migration of the *Confessio* to Iberia. Contributions by R. F. Yeager

and Tiago Viúla de Faria likewise probe the more shadowy but nevertheless intriguing dimensions of Gower's connections with Portugal and Spain. Yeager suggests, for example, the possible influence of Pedro Alfonso's twelfth-century anthology of fables, *Disciplina Clericalis*, a nearly ubiquitous text in medieval libraries, on the *Confessio's* "Tale of the Three Questions," for which (unlike most of Gower's *exempla*) an exact source has yet to be identified. Viúla de Faria, for his part, proposes in contrast with the prevailing hypothesis of a royal avenue for the *Confessio's* progress to Iberia an ecclesiastical one—the bishop of Norwich, Henry Despenser, whose "literary tastes may well have warranted a personal interest" in the poem and whose "links with Philippa of Lancaster were both strong and enduring" (136–137). None of the essays in Yeager and Sáez-Hidalgo's "Iberia" section has anything definitive to report about Gower, his works, and that territory. Their hypotheses, however, are energizing precisely because they are grounded in nuanced analyses of historical and cultural circumstances that involved English international interests and by way of these, quite possibly, some of Gower's writings.

There is much to be learned about non-Iberian Gower in this volume as well. Noteworthy among the other essays collected here is Barbara Shailor's fascinating report, "The Yale Gower Manuscript, Beinecke Osborn MS fa.1: Paleographical, Codicological, Technological Challenges and Opportunities," concerning what "The objective testing of inks and pigments" (not to mention mildew!) analyzed "scientifically across a corpus of manuscripts" (85) can tell us about particular Gower codices, in this case the vexed copy of the *Confessio* that is now Beinecke Osborn MS fa.1. Two areas of Gower's minor literary activity that usually escape notice altogether or are denigrated in contrast with his major works are scrutinized by Alastair J. Minnis and Siân Echard, respectively: the Latin glosses to the *Confessio* and the poet's shorter Latin verse. Minnis's "Inglorious Glosses?" and Echard's "The Long and the Short of It: On Gower's Forms" both encourage us to view the poet's

literary sensibility as “knotty” (249), to use Echard’s metaphor—more intricate, versatile, and self-reflective than critics usually allow. Robert R. Edwards and Ethan Knapp likewise introduce us to a complex Gower, but by adopting a wider and comprehensive rather than narrow and selective perspective on his achievement—comparing it, respectively, to the artistic ambition of Virgil’s epic trajectory and to the historical grandeur of Balzac’s *La Comédie Humaine*.

The poet who emerges from a reading of *John Gower in England and Iberia* is I think a much more sophisticated and bracing figure than even Gower aficionados have hitherto acknowledged: global in his appeal, erudite in his textual practices, and (for someone so preoccupied with the Seven Deadly Sins) refreshingly secular in his aesthetic concerns. This Gower will never entirely replace the poet valued by other, more traditional readers for his parochialism, conventionality, and religion. He will, however, usefully complicate that author’s portrait and will it is hoped inspire a new generation of scholars to explore the works and influence of one of medieval England’s internationally regarded literary geniuses.

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