

# Gower as a Sophisticated Storyteller: Narrative Qualities and Readership

Lee, Dongchoon

## 차 례

- I. Ambiguity and Complexity of Narrative Voices
- II. Narrator's Inconsistency and Unreliability
- III. Irony and Humor
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In the Prologue to the *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower says that he can write afresh some “matiere/Essampled of these olde wyse” because of its contemporary and future relevance (*Prologus*, 1–11).<sup>1)</sup> Among the materials for Gower’s tale-telling, as the critics have noted, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* are the major sources which were most familiar to and frequently used in the *Confessio* by him.<sup>2)</sup> As Ovid tried to

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1) John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* in *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford UP, 1901). All further references to Gower’s works are from this edition.

2) Derek Pearsall notes that Ovid provides 38 of the 133 stories in the *Confessio*, or 4,419 lines out of 17,213 (the total length of the *Confessio* is 33,444); see “Gower’s Narrative Art,” *PMLA* 81 (1966): 478; see also Alastair Minnis, John Gower, *Sapiens* in Ethics and Politics, *Medium Aevum* 49 (1980): 207–29. For further study of Gower’s use of the medieval texts of Ovid, see Conrad Mainzer, “John Gower’s Use of the ‘Medieval Ovid’ in the *Confessio Amantis*,” *Medium Aevum* 41 (1972): 215–29; see also David W. Hiscoe, “The Ovidian Comic Strategy,” *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985): 367–85 and Thomas J. Hatton, “John Gower’s Use of Ovid in Book III of the *Confessio Amantis*,” *Mediaevalia* 13 (1989): 257–74 for the study of Gower’s narrative techniques in comparison with the Ovidian narrative styles.

shift away the burden of the influence of the Virgilian popular myths through the employment of his noble storytelling devices, Gower handled the Ovidian tales to suit his own purposes with various ways. As Thomas Hatton classifies through the relationship between Genius and the stories he tells, the first way of handling the Ovidian sources is to tell the tale “correctly” and to apply a traditional moral (259). In this case, Gower’s treatment of the tales told by Ovid shows his ability to condense a long and involved narrative into a short exemplum. His style in these tales is so calculated and enclosed for the indoctrination of moral ideas to Amans that it allows for fewer digressions within a narrative, though there are plenty of digressions in the matter uniting the tales. Gower prunes out materials which might counter his predetermined moral and the result is a straightforward, monologic narrative without apparent irony or ambivalence.

Moreover, Gower’s redaction of Ovid’s tales has the rapid forward movement to attain the pre-determined moral. Accordingly, the story-line of the tales is of brevity and simplicity. Within these tales, Gower rarely takes us inside a characters’ mind. These narrative features—the brevity of narrative-line, the rapidity of narrative-flow, the didactic and monotonous tone, the authorial voice of the narrator, and the simple characterization—that contrast with those of Chaucer’s tale-telling might have served to estimate Gower as a moral “philosopher” rather than as a poet. However, it is not an adequate estimation to call Gower simply an unsophisticated moral teacher against Chaucer’s refined narrative art. Gower’s philosophical complexity and literary depth in the *Confessio Amantis* are noticed, and above all, his sense of incongruity and irony, like Chaucer, is highly refined in his work.

In my discussion of Gower’s tale and tale-telling, I will focus on how Gower uses his narrative skills, especially the strategy of dialogic craftsmanship, in the *Confessio Amantis*, which result in producing

something new and original in terms of his intention for the audience as well as of narrative voice and character.

## I. Ambiguity and Complexity of Narrative Voices

Above all, Gower's literary talent as a poet is found in his way of treating the Ovidian tales. Gower allows his narrator, Genius, to tell the Ovidian tales "correctly" in accordance with Ovid's original version, and yet lets him ignore the moralizations traditionally associated with the story in the fourteenth century. In addition, as Thomas Hatton points out, Genius deliberately mistells the tales or deviates "in some important or apparently trivial respects" from the Ovidian materials (257). Genius's deliberate mistelling of the Ovidian sources results in creating the gap between the Ovidian stories that a reader would already know and Genius' altered versions, and it is through the gap that Gower demands the audience's own active role in interpreting the ambiguity of a text or in filling in a text which Genius misses. Furthermore, the contradictory effect which results from the gap between Genius' falsification of an original tale and the reader's expectation of it produces the deflating guffaws. As the representative examples of this narrative style, I want to analyze two of Gower's tales--the *Tale of Canace and Machaire* and the *Tale of Dido and Aeneas*--in the *Confessio Amantis*. In addition to sustained humor and audience engagement, the storytelling styles of the two tales commonly shows that Gower weaves the various voices on a theme without taking an explicit stance himself.

As the first tale for discussing the third deadly sin, *wrath*, Genius introduces to Amans the *Tale of Canace and Machaire* which is drawn from Ovid's *Heroides* XI. The story-line of Gower's tale does not much deviate

from his source, except for the slight variations which Genius makes from his source in order to clarify his own viewpoint. Seen from the Propp's morphological paradigm, the tale consists of only several functional events without any digressive material that would interfere with his predetermined moral, *wrath*. Moreover, Genius narrates the tragic events with levelled interest in an "objective" manner without his emotional involvement in them. Even he is apt to suppress the emotional expressions of character, because plot is everything for him in order to fit the tale into his explicit moral. In this regard, Gower's *Tale of Canace and Machaire* appears straightforward, coherent without apparent irony and ambivalence. But, in spite of the rapid forward movement, the swift summaries of action, and description necessary for short tale of this kind, the complexity of narrative voice that lurks in this straightforward exemplum makes the story ambiguous, and it demands a reader's critical reading for figuring out meaning or what might be seen as authorial intent.

From this simple skeleton of the tale, Genius draws as a teaching for Amans the destructive cruelty engendered by the melancholy and wrath of Eolus: "Bot for al that he was to wyte,/Thurgh his sodein Malencolie/To do so gret a felonie" (III. 334-36). The moral issue which Genius extracts from the *Tale of Canace and Machaire* is quite different from that which have resided in the commentators' thought on the tale in Gower's age. As implied in Chaucer's Man of Law's refusal to tell the "wikked ensample" of Canace (II. l. 78), the story of Canace was usually described simply as an *exemplum* of illicit love or mad passion. But Genius twists and stretches the Ovidian material to clothe his narrative purpose of curing Amans' wrath of his mind.

In order to fulfill his intention of bringing Eolus' "Malencolie" in relief rather than the intrinsic moralization of the tale, incest, Genius misguidedly excuses the love affair between the brother and the sister by merely

saying that they “halt the lawes of nature” (III. 157). Genius’ lenient attitude toward their incestual love on the grounds that they simply acted on the law of Nature is repeated once again (III. 170–78). Moreover, Genius reinforces his intention of excusing their blind instinctual nature of sexual passion and of arousing the pathos in our mind through his variations from his source. In the *Heroides*, Canace writes to her brother after Eolus has exposed her child to the wild beasts of the forest. Gower’s version tells that Canace holds the baby as she writes her letter. In particular, Gower’s vivid description of Canace’s baby, after she kills herself, is strong enough to draw the audience’s attention to Eolus’ “horrible crualte:”

The child lay bathende in hire blod  
 Out rolled fro the moder barm,  
 And for the blod was hot and warm,  
 He basketh him aboute thrinne. (III. 312–15)

Genius’ treatment of Eolus as an incarnation of wrath is well revealed, when Eolus rejects Canace’s plea—“Ha mercy! fader, thenk I am/Thi child, and of thi blod I cam” (III. 225–26), and when he further abandons her baby in a “wilde place” where “som beste him mai devoure” (III. 327).

Through Eolus’ merciless treatment of his daughter and her baby, Genius deduces his governing moral of the tale which is ill-fitted with the intrinsic lesson of Ovid’s tale as follows:

Ha, who herde evere singe or rede  
 Of such a thing as that was do?  
 Bot he which ladde his wraththe so  
 Hath knowe of love bot a lite;  
 Bot for al that he was to wyte,

Thurgh his sodein Malencolie  
 To do so gret a felonie. (III. 330–36)

Although Eolus acts out of “wilde wode peine” and “frenesie,” and appears to deserve being condemned from Genius’ point of view, as the critics have noted,<sup>3)</sup> however, Genius’ teaching on the tale cannot be accepted as Gower’s final words. In this tale, meaning or what might be seen as authorial intention is not given directly by the author, but it should be ferreted out by the reader’s intellect and agility. Here Gower shows ambiguity, complexity, and the relativity of all meaning through the technique of irony, and he creates the dialogic discourse between the characters, even including himself and the audience. In short, for Gower, meaning is qualified not by the author’s definitive judgment on a certain issue, but by the several points of view from which the reader assesses it.

David Benson has first noted that Gower chose to tell ironically the *Tale of Canace and Machaire* in order to obfuscate the issues surrounding incest. According to him, although the tale, at a surface level, focuses on Eolus’ unrelenting cruelty toward Canace and even her baby rather than on the illicit love between a brother and a sister, in fact, Gower’s true voice against incest is carefully embedded within the tale. As the example, David Benson points out that the blindness of the lovers is repeatedly stressed throughout the tale (III. 159, 160, and 179), and some wording, like “fall” (III. 180) and “enchanted” (III. 178) used for describing their relationship, carries a sinister and negative meaning. As another evidence to show Gower’s disapproval of their incest, he presents Gower’s use of the image of bird trapped in a net. Through citing a few lines: “Riht so thei

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3) For instance, see Alastair Minnis, Thomas Hatton, and Georgiana Donavin, *Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower’s Confessio Amantis* (Canada: English Literary Studies at the University of Victoria, 1993); see also David Benson, “Incest and Moral Poetry in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 100–9.

hadde non insihte;/Bot as the bridd which wole alihte/And seth the mete and noght the net" (III. 181–83), he contends that they have eyes but will not see. Conclusively Benson says that they simply abandon reason for immediate self-gratification (103–4).

## II. Narrator's Inconsistency and Unreliability

In addition to Gower's careful choice of words and images within the tale in order to undercut Genius' point of view, what makes the reader more complicated in sorting out Gower's perspective is the narrator, Genius. As Donald Schueler suggests that the failure of identifying the characterization of Genius means the failure of understanding the theme and structure of the *Confessio* (243), the correct understanding of Genius' role is the key to figuring out what might be seen as Gower's genuine intention on the issues surrounding the *Tale of Canace and Machaire*. Although there are fewer digressions within each tale of the *Confessio*, it is through plenty of digressions in between the tales that Gower reveals Genius' inconsistency and unreliability as a story-teller. Through the digressions consisting of the conversations between Genius and his student, Amans, before entering into the tales proper, Gower presents Genius as a developing character from a false priest of Venus to a priest of conscience who exhorts Amans to forgo Venus.

First of all, Genius' introductory discourse about himself and his role marks the conflict between his subservience to Venus and his allegiance to the true priesthood. Genius introduces himself to Amans as Venus' priest "touchende of love" (I. 236), and goes on to say:

After the disposicioun  
Of Venus, whos condicioun  
I moste folwe, as I am holde. (I. 259–61)

In spite of self-revelation of his relation to Venus and of the standards of conduct he should follow, Genius, on the other hand, declares:

I wol thi schrifte so enforme,  
That ate leste thou schalt hier  
The vices, and to thi matiere  
Of love I schal hem so remene,  
That thou schalt knowe what thei mene. (I. 276–80)

Here Genius tries to make, to borrow Winthrop Wetherbee's words, "a kind of honorable compromise" between his office as a priest of Venus and the intrinsic duty of a priest (243).

Genius' irreconcilable perspective which is conditioned both by Venus' priestly role and the true role of a priest at the beginning of the *Confessio* is continued up to Book III, and his perspective influences the tale that we have discussed. The *Tale of Canace and Machiare* faithfully reflects such dual perspective that Genius has kept from the outset. As Venus' priest, it is reasonable that Genius excuses the incest between a sister and a brother, because they are just compelled to follow the dictates of Cupid and Nature. Certainly, from the viewpoint of the Goddess of Love, Eolus, who is strange to love, deserves to be blamed rather than the lovers. In this regard, Genius appears to be faithful to his job as a priest of Venus here. Moreover, Genius in the *Tale of Canace and Machaire* devotes himself to his other role as a true priest of Amans.

Before telling the tale proper as a means of curing Amans' disease, Genius listens to the symptom that Amans confesses:



And al makth love, wel I wot,  
 Of which myn herte is evere hot,  
 So that I brenne as doth a glede  
 For Wrathe that I mai nocht spede. (III. 37–40)

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And I am wroth, I not how ofte;  
 And al it is Malencolie,  
 Which groweth of the fantasie  
 Of love, that me wol nocht loute:  
 So bere I forth an angri snoute  
 Ful manye times in a yer. (III. 124–29)

Genius, realizing that Amans' wrath arises from his frustration of lust for his lady, carefully prescribes the tale in order to suit Amans' symptom. As Amans' failure of indulging in lechery drives him to a miserable wrath, the unreasonable love in the tale quickly leads to unreasonable anger. After all, considered from both the perspective of Venius' priestly role and that of a true priest, Eolus' "malencolie" and cruel punishment cannot be tolerated, since they separate the soul from God and the lover from his beloved. Viewed in the light of Genius' double position as a priest of Venus and the intrinsic duty of a priest, the tale of Canace is placed before the moment when Genius' moral development from a priest of Venus to a priest of conscience completes. In short, Genius, still influenced by Venus, mistakenly justifies the prohibited love between Canace and Machaire by "emphasizing its origins in the Court of Love" (Donavin 37).

From Book IV on, however, Genius' development toward a true priest happens gradually. For an instance, Genius, through the tale of Rosiphelee (1245–1446), leaves us in no doubt concerning his preference for "marriage" rather than for "the love of paramours" (1268–70). Likewise, Genius teaches Amans that the true human love lies in the married life (IV. 1452–54). Genius' indoctrination of chaste married love to Amans

coincides with the teaching of the Christian Church (Minnis 50–78), and is continuously repeated through out Book IV (1476–77, 1495–96, and 1469–71). Genius’ affirmation on the laws of marriage culminates in Book VII and VIII in which his final words on such ambiguous issues like incest and lust are believed to be Gower’s own.<sup>4)</sup> As in the story of Tobias and Sarah in Book VII, Genius as a priest of God endorses his firm belief in the “honeste” love based on the doctrine of marriage and childbearing through the tale of Apollonius. Indeed, contradiction in Genius’ statements on these issues, especially, on incest, between before and after Book IV comes to be shaped from Book V.

Book V marks the turning point of Genius’ transformation from a priest of Venus to a true priest. Genius, realizing “shame” of his worshipping Venus and Cupid as God and Goddess of Love, repudiates their authority (V. 1382) and discloses their incestuous love:

So whan thei [Cupid and Venus] weren bothe al one,  
 As he which yhen hadde none  
 To se reson, his Moder kiste;  
 And sche also, that nothing wiste  
 Bot that which unto lust belongeth,  
 To ben hire love him underfongeth.  
 Thus was he blind, and sche unwys:  
 Bot natheles this cause it is,  
 Why Cupide is the god of love,  
 For his his moder dorste love. (V. 1411–20)

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4) Russell Peck maintains that Book VII and VIII of Gower’s *Confessio* are “comparable in its function to the *Parson’s Tale* and *Retraction* as conclusion to the *Canterbury Tale*.” As the fictive voices of Chaucer’s tale-tellers in the *Canterbury Tales* are shifted away in the *Parson’s Tale* and *Retraction*, similarly, there is no disagreement in that Genius’s voice in Book VII and VIII coincides with Gower’s true one. See his article, “The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994): 267.

Right here, Genius as a priest of Venus ironically betrays himself. As David Benson has noted, Genius, through the language familiar from the story of Canace, unconsciously criticizes the incestuous union of Venus and Cupid and even shows Venus promulgating “laws” of promiscuity and prostitution (105). Through Genius’s self-betraying irony, the reader comes to realize that, as Russell Peck remarks, Genius was “a fiction telling fictions, or, rather, a double fiction telling fictions to a fiction [Amans]” (213). What he states in the *Tale of Canace and Machaire* is merely a lie which is far away from Gower’s genuine thought on incest. In other words, a storyteller’s “misuse” of the authoritative or classical texts serves to provide the audience with the context from which to judge his/her narrative, Gower as a sophisticated poet and ironist allows his unreliable tale-narrator, Genius, to twist the Ovidian tale for his own comic purpose and to produce the gap between what is said and what is meant on the theme of incest. It is through the ironic voice of Genius that Gower makes the reader and himself free from a seemingly authorial position that Genius assumes and from heavy obligation of moral pronouncement as an author respectively (250–69). Eventually, the truth among the fictions or lies depends solely on the audience’s capacity to penetrate Genius’ rhetorical nonsense.

### III. Irony and Humor

Another example which shows Gower’s talent as a humorist and ironist is the *exemplum* of Aeneas and Dido at the beginning of Book IV. As an illustration of sloth, the tale deals with how Aeneas, by failing to return to Carthage, caused the death of Dido. Applying the tale to the Propertian paradigm, we can find that only two functions—Aeneas’ *absentation* and

Dido's [self] *villainy*--are imbedded within the short descriptive elements necessary for the progress of the story. Comparing the tale with Dido's letter to Aeneas in Ovid's *Heroides*, the former removes all the previous events between Aeneas and Dido that have happened before the function of Aeneas' *absentation*. Furthermore, the narrator in Gower's version almost eliminates the emotional reactions of the heroine that are strikingly revealed in Ovid's version. As in the *Tale of Canace and Machaire*, the narrator's attention is paid only to the plot, more specifically, the moral that he must graft onto the tale. In addition to the similarity in terms of narrative stylistics between the two tales, both the tale of Canace and the tale of Aeneas commonly cause the comic effect, and they also demand the reader's participation for searching for meaning or what might be seen as authorial intention through Gower's narrative device of irony. In spite of these similarities between the two tales, there exists a slight difference in that, unlike the tale of Canace, the latter, like the tale of Midas in the Wife of Bath's narrative, corresponds to the case of Gower's intentional mistelling of his source, Ovid's *Heroides*, in order to force his moral point. Gower lets his infallible narrator, Genius, intentionally miss some important or apparent trivial points from Ovid's tale and then expects his reader to find them.

Compared with his original, Gower's version is so simple and sketchy that there seems to be no complexity and difficulty in understanding it. But there is irony in that clarity, and the reader's ability to probe into the ambiguities of the tale is required. First, what draws the reader's doubt from Gower's redaction of Dido's epistle in the *Heroides* is that Aeneas is not described to be in love with Dido. According to his version, she simply puts her faith on his words: "Upon the wordes whiche he seide,/That al hire herte on him sche leide..." (IV. 89-90). Furthermore, Gower allows his tale-teller, Genius, purposely to miss Aeneas' commitment to his high

destiny in Italy through a passing reference to Aeneas' sailing for Italy (IV. 92–4). In particular, Genius' intention of shaping the tale for his predetermined moral is well reflected in his complete omission of the fact that Aeneas had no intention of returning. In this tale, Gower does not want his reader to read what is told by Genius straightforwardly. Gower expects the reader of knowledge and sophistication to observe the deviations that Genius makes from his original source and lets him catch the inappropriateness of Genius' application of the exemplified moral—*lachesse*—to the tale.

Considered from Ovid's version of Dido in the *Heroides*, Aeneas is not slow at all, but active in his performance of the heroic purpose. As Amans is to be blamed for his infatuation with the lady whose mind cannot be promised to return to him, Dido is the real target which Gower aims at. Only she is concerned with love, regardless of his counterpart, Aeneas, and her vain longing for Aeneas with no intention of returning drives her to commit a more heinous vice—self-annihilation—than a vice of “*lachesse in loves cas.*”<sup>5)</sup> As in the *Tale of Canace and Machaire*, Gower implicitly says through the tale that a reader serves as a central role in interpreting the indeterminate meaning of the tale. Genius' failure in driving his reader, Amans, to repent through his telling of fiction is another example to show that a reader cannot help but read a text subjectively. Gower's ideas about story and storytelling do not deviate from those of the Medieval artful writers in that a story is fiction and that the key to a meaning lies in a reader's hand. In this regard, Gower, although treating of ethics and with the ethical purpose of his poem strongly in his mind, was a poet, not a cleric.

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5) Peck also remarks that “Dido is the slothful one, despite her diligence,” since Dido, obsessed with “all the hot pains of her heart and fertile imagination,” ignores God's dictate of safeguarding one's soul. See his “The Problematics of Irony in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*,” 217.

## IV. Character

In addition to a *tour de force* of sustained humor and audience engagement through his narrative device of irony, Gower's psychological treatment of Amans in Books III and IV enables us to label him as a sophisticated storyteller. As I have mentioned at the outset of our discussion on Gower's narrative features in general, certainly, we cannot see any character subtly portrayed in the exemplary narratives of the *Confessio Amantis*. Through the digressions placed before the tales proper in Book III, however, Gower gives the full treatment to Amans as a psychological character. Gower portrays Amans as a character whose mind is torn between the two conflicting moods--hope and despair, and love and hatred, which is a rich literary topos, as commonly seen in other professional raconteurs' treatment of a love-stricken character. But Gower's uniqueness in his characterization of Amans, as Peck has noted, lies in Amans' naïveté and gentle candor, beyond the tradition of the French *dît amoureux* (81).

As his confession for any forms of the prescribed sin, *wrath*, which he has committed, Amans explains his youthful impetuosity and melancholy for his lady's unresponsiveness to his long service (III. 69-74). But Amans' mood of despair quickly changes, if he should stand beside his lover and he hears "a goodli word" (III. 99) from her:

So glad I am of the presence  
Of hire, that I all offence  
Foryete, as thogh it were noight,  
So overgladed is my thought. (III. 103-6).

Momentarily, he forgets all anger and hatred which earlier well up in his mind. As we might expect, however, his melancholic anger returns, when

she “miscaste hire yhe” or “liste noght to loke” (III. 110–11). These mood swings, which Amans suffers in his mind, are the typical symptom which we can find in a discourse of love. Above all, Gower’s unique artistry in portraying Amans’ interiority is carried in the passages which convey to us Amans’ peculiar behaviors, after he falls into his former state of anger again:

And thus myn hand ayein the pricke  
 I hurte and have do many day,  
 And go so forth as I go may,  
 Fulofte bitinge on my lippe,  
 And make unto miself a whippe,  
 With which in many a chele and hete  
 Mi wofull herte is so tobete,  
 That all my wittes ben unsofte  
 And I am wroth, I not how ofte; (III. 116–24)

These passages mark Gower’s uniqueness in his presentation of the infatuated lover, which surpasses the conventional description of a lover. In particular, as the visual description of January’s gesture and posture in a detailed way helps us to understand his inner psychology, his artistry of visualizing Amans’ own bearings here that he assumes to soften his anger and despair provides the reader with the comic and fresh effect. It also enables us to view Amans’ mental state more vividly and palpably.

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Abstract

## **Gower as a Sophisticated Storyteller: Narrative Qualities and Readership**

Lee, Dongchoon (Daegu University)

Gower's ideas about story and storytelling do not deviate from those of the Medieval artful writers like Chaucer in that a story is fiction and that the key to a meaning lies in a reader's hand. Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* shows ambiguity, complexity, and the relativity of all meaning through the technique of irony, and he creates the dialogic discourse between the characters, even including himself and the audience. In his work, meaning or what might be seen as authorial intention is not given directly by the author, but it should be ferreted out by the reader's intellect and agility. In this regard, Gower, although treating of ethics and with the ethical purpose of his poem strongly in his mind, was a poet, not a moral philosopher.

Gower as a sophisticated poet and ironist allows his unreliable tale-narrator, Genius, to twist his tale-telling materials for his own comic purpose and to produce the gap between what is said and what is meant. It is through the ironic voice of Genius that Gower makes the reader and himself free from a seemingly authorial position that Genius assumes and from heavy obligation of moral pronouncement as an author respectively. Eventually, the truth among the fictions or lies depends solely on the audience's capacity to penetrate Genius' rhetorical nonsense. In addition to a *tour de force* of sustained humor and audience engagement through his narrative devices, Gower's psychological treatment of Amans in Books III

and IV enables us to label him as a sophisticated storyteller.

**Key Words :** *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower, Narrative Devices, Readership, Character

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이름: 이동춘

소속: 대구대학교

주소: (712-714) 경북 경산시 진량읍 대구대로 201 대구대학교 영어영문학과

이메일: dcleee@daegu.ac.kr

