

Celebrating John Gower

Long overshadowed by Chaucer, Gower's star is rising.



John Gower was a medieval English poet and a contemporary and friend of Geoffrey Chaucer. Both were equally well known, cited, and admired in their own times until about 1700. After that, Chaucer's star began to eclipse Gower's.

Yet ask a young medievalist whose work is capturing the notice of up-and-coming scholars, and the answer is once again as likely to be Gower as it is Chaucer.

Early this month, nearly 150 scholars and students from as many as 20 nations convened at the University to share their research on Gower at the conference "John Gower: Language, Cognition, and Performance," the Third International Congress of the John Gower Society and the first to be held in the United States.

Why is Gower so hot? According to Russell Peck, the John Hall Deane Professor of Rhetoric and Literature at Rochester, and a leading Gower scholar, one reason is that Gower's work relates to many modern disciplines, from literary craftsmanship and gender studies, to cognitive science and medical humanities.

Another reason is the wide accessibility of Gower's work online, including a digital project of the Robbins Library called the Middle English Text Series, which has been embraced by the National Endowment for the Humanities as a model of what the field of digital humanities can offer. 📖



John Gower

Geoffrey Chaucer

c. 1330 to 1408	Lived from	c. 1340 to 1400
Latin, Old French, Middle English	Wrote in	Middle English
Related to land holders in northern England and Kent.	Family origins	Born to London wine merchant. Not of the nobility, but close to the household of John of Gaunt.
Strong links to law and the Inns of Court. Chaucer's legal executor in the 1370s.	Profession	Courtier, diplomat, MP, civil servant, chaperone to the Queen's court.
<i>Confessio Amantis</i> (<i>Confession of the Lover</i>)	Best known for	<i>The Canterbury Tales</i> and <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>
Politics, laws, institutions, and ethics.	Common themes	Ordinary people, human nature, and social satire.
"A great storyteller, classicist, and lover of books."	It's often been said that he's ...	The "father of English literature."
Gower was the only English poet to provide a detailed personal account of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 as well as an allegory on the overthrow of Richard II. His works are a window into the trilingual culture of 14th-century England.	John Gower scholars wish it were more often said that ...	Chaucer as well as Shakespeare and Ben Jonson admired and drew on Gower's work.

SOURCES: The Gower Project (www.gowerproject.org), founded by Eve Salisbury '95 (PhD), professor of English at Western Michigan University; Russell Peck, the John Hall Deane Professor of Rhetoric and Literature